

Winter 2024
E-Zine
Issue 102

ISSN 2291-4269

Royal City
Literary Arts
Society

R C

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“Wordplay at work.”



Special Feature
Write on! Contest
2024 Winners

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2024 WRITE ON! CONTEST WINNERS

\$150 first prize \$100 second prize \$75 third prize

Congratulations to all our finalists! Thank you to everyone who submitted!

POETRY WINNERS (Poetry Judge: HANNAH SIDEN)

Poetry First Place: CHELSEA COMEAU – *TIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT*

Poetry Second Place: Isabella Mori – *the coming of the goddess*

Poetry Third Place: Ford Weisberg – *Harpooned*

Poetry Honourable Mentions

Emily Molinari – *Something I never told you*

Fran Bourassa – *On the West Coast Trail*

Alvin Ens – *Udderly Impossible*

Bayantseva Singh Pandher – *I Try*

NON-FICTION WINNERS (Non-Fiction Judge: LESLEY HEBERT)

Non-Fiction First Place: J.G. CHAYKO – *THE HOMEWRECKER*

Non-Fiction Second Place: Kim Harrison – *This One's for Munro*

Non-Fiction Third Place: Isabella Mori – *All the Way From The Eocene on Highway 400*

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Malleck – *Border Crossings*

Mark LeBourdais – *Postcards from Purgatory*

Jean-François Chénier – *Photo Finish*

FICTION WINNERS (Fiction Judge: CLAIRE LAWRENCE)

Fiction First Place: SHARON MCINNES – *THROUGH THE FOG*

Fiction Second Place: Alan Girling – *The Oldest Lottery*

Fiction Third Place: Chelsea Comeau – *His Hands Made For Fixing Things*

Fiction Honourable Mentions

Kirk McDougall – *Otto*

Julian Worker – *Robert Robot*

Amber Fenik – *The House on Pike Lake*



12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024 Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions





POETRY WINNERS

Judge
Hannah Sidden



Poetry First Place: CHELSEA COMEAU - TIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT
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Poetry Third Place: Ford Weisberg - Harpooned

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12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Poetry First Place Winner

Chelsea Comeau

TIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT

We were such reckless kids back then, who
only wanted to be loved, our skirts thin enough to be
bed sheets, shirts little more than beadwork bras. Leaving tracks
up and down the street during rush hour just to see who would honk.
In tenth grade, my friend had an affair with an older,
married man—*no, not an affair, I understand now she was*
prey, it took so long to see that—
who lived in a small yellow house a couple blocks
from our school. Sometimes I went with her on our lunch break and
sat alone in his living room, the bedroom door locked, thinking
how stupid she was, how maybe I wished
I could be stupid too. When he answered he door,
he towered over us and smoked cigarettes. Taught us how
to drop acid using Listerine gel squares. *Stick your tongue out for me—*
now keep your mouth shut til there's nothing left.
The skin at the tips of his fingers forever yellow from nicotine.
Sometimes my friend bragged about the things he gave her—flowers
from the market next to the cemetery that sold wilted bouquets of
carnations—but most times she didn't. The garland
of tapered beads he made her keep in her backpack so
his wife wouldn't find them. The bruises he left behind
on her arms and breasts, blue as brand new jewellery.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Poetry Second Place Winner

Isabella Mori

the coming of the goddess

she roller skated away with a roll of stolen environmentally friendly toilet paper balancing on her very nose. she roller skated out of the superstore and into the rainbow, and sailed down the aisles of the rainbow, picking up pickled rainbow catfood and slightly filthy rainbow figurines and crooked rainbow cookies and never paid a cent.

a scent of perfumed fire place smoke followed her and then gave up the chase.

she was too fast.
she was too fat.

her fat rolled on her roller skates like a herd of well oiled ball bearings that could otherwise be found only in racing cars and supertankers. her boobs bounced arrogantly on her mighty belly as the wind tried to catch up with her rollerskates as she flew on, calmly, leaving the rainbow, lovely luscious rainbow, behind.

a shopping cart was strapped casually onto her sturdy back, and indeed, it looked like wings, like golden wings gleaming in the sunset, corpuscles of pollution dancing around her in the yellow clouds, bowing in playful formations to her, she who waved her huge extremities and whose armpits spawned aromas that made the bulls down here on earth sigh hopefully in full moon sleep.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Poetry Third Place Winner

Ford Weisberg

Harpooned

for pretending life's not
lived below, I scuba thrice

weekly through my sub
conscious with only Doc

Marcus and dreams for fins
and goggles. I scour

the coral mire for mating
rites, for one sustaining

bond, to stub
upon others in my glass

2

bottom reliquary. Back
in drydock, on Marcus' lubbered

leatherette for some marriage mouth
to mouth with Wifey, who—by hair dragged

before this psychic
lighting tech—faces my *J'accuse* for chucking

cornflakes at my head after stripping
our savings to buy a Borneo

treehouse kit, back when we
two warthog inmates of a petting

zoo smeared each other hoof

3

and snout with lip gloss. After thirty

plus years this Thursday, Marcus calls
from his deathbed to implore me never

to myself dilute, to keep my
harpoon loaded.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Poetry Honourable Mention

Emily Molinari

Something I never told you:

for my mother

when I was small & in need
of comfort, my favourite place
was your closet, your basket of scarves.
I would bury my face in Egyptian cotton
& fill my lungs with the lemony scent
of your Clinique perfume.

You thought it was the cat
wreaking havoc on your clothes,
but it was me. (Though sometimes
I brought the cat & we cuddled together
in the swaths of coloured fabric. I guess
it was our way of returning to the womb.

I let you blame the cat, though, I never told you
it was me—not even when your eyes puffed red
from his dander & fur, woven tightly in among
the threads of your wardrobe.)

I loved to sit in the wicker chair
at your makeup table, to dangle my legs
above the carpet, try to reach my toes to touch.
I opened drawers with baited breath, enamoured
by these secret hideaways that held
your hair clips & gold & diamonds.
I traced my fingers over each item
before carefully returning it to its place.

Sometimes I would slip on a pair of your heels,
& look at myself in your scrolled oak mirror,
& imagine how one day I would be grown up

& I would smile & I would picture you
in your favourite black dress, covered in stars,
spinning slowly in front of the mirror.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Poetry Honourable Mention

Fran Bourassa

On the West Coast trail

On the 8th day I walk in a green fog by a green ocean
I breathe the green of the trees, the ferns, the salal
All day I walk myself on the trail
Front and back to me, they are walking themselves
Nothing reflects who we once were
We are strangers here and to each other The
trail is all there is; No past or future
Every step on it pounds my body, thrums in my head, drives out all other thoughts but
itself The trail coils up under my feet

Talk is saved for night. It is puny and tired. We
camp, backs against a cliff
Out beyond the fire and our small safe circle of yellow light
the shadows grow and wave like giant seaweed
beyond it, you will drown in the darkness.
At night I hike in and out of sleep on guard at the tent door
Under a full moon, I hear the sea surge around the edges of the
camp I can hear it coming for me
I hold my breath, my heart is a sinking stone

On the 9th day on the west coast trail
We are walking in the rain -and I am awake
I have not told the others we are being followed
I have not told them the sea is a shape shifter and only pretends to come apart in a
hand I see the glint of eyes in the shadows, hear the snap of twigs behind us
The water spirits laugh at us, their tiny tongues lick our faces
I hear the trees whispering to each other, plotting against us with the wind
The forest can smell my fear.
The trail winds around another bend and there is another bend before
us I know for certain, the trail will never end
and I am lost

On the 10th day I see them for what they are
Roots and stones: The bones and skulls of my ancestors
They know I have forgotten I walk on sacred ground
Forgotten to print my hand inside the claw scars on the trees

and place my feet in the tracks of the wolf - in the hoof ruts - dug deep in the earth
where the blood of murder and birth soaked in the ground

On the 11th day, I am walking in my ancestor's dream remembering our old life
Where once we planted five trees in return for taking one.
How we did not wash our clothes in holy rivers; and only placed
the ashes of our dead on its banks for safe keeping
How we sang the songs of thanksgiving, for earth, fire and rain
The trail winds around another bend and there is another bend before
us I know for certain, the trail will never end
I am home

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Poetry Honourable Mention

Alvin Ens

Udderly Impossible

Midst mighty din the beast came in,
Tail foll'wing like a rudder.
“Put hay in front end here,” he quipped,
“And milk comes out the udder.

“Bid for her now, this fine young cow.
Now offer up some money.
Just look at her, so sleek and slim.
Now isn’t she a honey?”

And then up-spoke an old cowpoke,
“Pray tell, where is the udder?
It looks to me more like a boy;
You’re lookin’ at her brudder.”

The auctioneer stepped back to peer,
Surveyed the rural wonder,
And stooped to get a better view
At things that should be under.

Fear now abides in quivering sides.
New terrors shake and shudder.
The tail comes up; the back end spouts.
It’s not milk from the udder.

“Bullshit here, Mr. Auctioneer;
That’s verbal diarrhea.
To milk that animal, my friend,
I’d really like to see ya.”

“Bull shit? Not so!” says friend, “I know.
Now let’s be very clear;
A part of him is not all there;
That critter is a steer.

“If as you say, you put in hay,
The steer will chew the cud er
Swallowed it without due care.
It will not reach an udder.”

The call goes out, with echoed shout,
“A steer, steer clear the steer!”
Too late for the sage on centre stage,
The spattered auctioneer.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Poetry Honourable Mention

Bayantseva Singh Pandher

I try

Waheguru
please forgive me

A Singhs just tryna do his best
Barely passing these tests
Too weak to see you and get blessed

This life is full of stress
Instead of drinking ambrosial nectar living in ecstasy
I drown in potholes of pegs
I drown in meaningless sex

At the gym exhaling your name
pushing each rep is my biggest flex
Just a luck of the draw
stuck at the bottom of the deck

Open my eyes
Can't tell the time
If its dawn or
If its dusk
So I skip another Amritvela snoring till there's sun

A sword or a gun
Somebody dissing you is no excuse to bust one

I hate cardio but I'm always on the run
Cuz where I'm from
The work is never done

A hawk versus a sparrow
A sparrow shining like the golden arrow
Please pause the smack talk
Three-twenty-five years later sparrows still kill hawks

I remember holding my mind hostage with a glock
Now in my mind I try every day to have the Naam locked

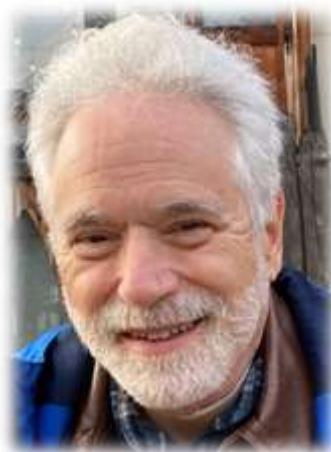
Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions



Chelsea Comeau is a freelance writer, editor, and web designer whose work has appeared in Room, CV2, and SubTerrain magazines, among others. Her chapbook *What You Leave Behind* was published in 2015 by Leaf Press, and earlier this year, Lorna Crozier chose her poem as one of the two winners of Planet Earth Poetry's Tribute to Patrick Lane contest.



Isabella Mori lives on the unceded, traditional and ancestral lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people aka Vancouver, BC. They are the author of three books of and about poetry, including *Not So Pretty Haiku*. They also write fiction and nonfiction and are the founder of Muriel's Journey Poetry Prize, which celebrates loud, socially engaged poetry. Publications have been in places such as *State Of Matter*, *Kingfisher*, *Signs Of Life*, *Presence*, and *The Group Of Seven Reimagined*. In the spring of 2020, Isabella was the writer-in-residence at the Historic Joy Kogawa House. A book about mental health and addiction is forthcoming in 2025.



Ford Weisberg is a poet located in Vancouver, B.C. He has spent a lifetime in the arts, first concertizing on wind instruments in Early Music, as well as on tinwhistle and flute in traditional Irish music. After years as a photographer and digital painter, Ford turned to poetry in 2014 after his wife (now deceased) was diagnosed with cancer. He is a member of the writing group Ramapough Poets, and holds a certificate in poetry from The Writer's Studio Online of Simon Fraser University.

Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions



Emily Molinari (she/her/hers) is a Canadian poet living on the unceded traditional territories of the Halq'eméylem speaking Coast Salish peoples, also known as New Westminster. She is the founder and editor of SAPP, a poetry zine and community arts movement showcasing local writers and artists, and a student of The Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University. She has been published in Reverie magazine and has work forthcoming in Emerge, an anthology. You can find more of her work, life, and writing on her Instagram @molinariwrites, or on her website emilymolinari.com.



Fran Bourassa is a poet and contributing writer to numerous anthologies, including *Breaking the Surface*, *the North Shore Writers Anthology*, *Alive at the Centre*, *the Pacific Poetry Anthology* and the acclaimed *Force Field – 77 BC Poets*. Fran has won first prize in numerous writing contests, including at the Vancouver International Writers Festival, North Shore Writers Festival, BC Federation of Writers and most recently her poem "Boom Man" won first in the 50th Anniversary of the Beachcombers Anthology. Fran, a Pisces, has made her return to her soul's home on the Sunshine Coast.



Alvin Ens was a high school English teacher. He calls himself a mentor, editor, poet, and writer of prose; he is a member of Fraser Valley Poetry Society and Fraser Valley Christian Writers and several clubs beyond. In 2005 the Abbotsford Arts Council awarded him Abbotsford's outstanding literary artist.



Bayantseva Singh Pandher is a 20 year old poet, currently attending the creative writing program at Douglas College. Writing poetry and performing at open mic's for two years now, Bayantseva has always viewed poetry as hip-hop, and that opened up possibilities to hone his craft and poetic style. He writes poetry to inspire, educate and motivate people.



2024 WRITE ON! CONTEST COMMENTS FROM OUR POETRY JUDGE HANNAH SIDEN



POETRY WINNERS

Poetry First Place: CHELSEA COMEAU – TIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT

Poetry Second Place: Isabella Mori – the coming of the goddess

Poetry Third Place: Ford Weisberg – Harpooned

Poetry Honourable Mentions

Emily Molinari – *Something I never told you*

Fran Bourassa – *On the West Coast Trail*

Alvin Ens – *Udderly Impossible*

Bayantseva Singh Pandher – *I Try*

First Place TIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT by Chelsea Comeau

This is an affecting poem that deals with a difficult topic elegantly and empathetically, speaking bluntly when needed but revealing only what is necessary, so the glimpses of violence do not feel gratuitous.

The now older speaker revisits (and sometimes rewrites) memories from their new, more clear-eyed perspective, sometimes stumbling over the learned societal assumptions of youth (“my friend had an affair with an older, / married man—no, not an affair, I understand now she was / prey, it took so long to see that—”). Yet despite dealing in hindsight, the poem feels fresh with sensory details: “the skin at the tips of his fingers forever yellow with nicotine”, “flowers from the market next to the cemetery that sold wilted bouquets of carnations”.

In “Til There’s Nothing Left” the speaker takes back their voice and the voice of their friend after they had been silenced by this older man and by patriarchy more broadly. This silence is implied in the only line directly quoted from this man (while teaching them how to drop acid): “Stick your tongue out for me—/ now keep your mouth shut til there’s nothing left.” Now, through the very existence of this poem, that silence is broken. The speaker’s younger self and friend are finally recognized as what they were: “kids” who “only wanted to be loved” — who were taken advantage of.

However, the speaker doesn’t strip these kids of their unique complexities and instead leans into those aspects, such as the image of their younger self sitting outside the bedroom where their friend is with the man, “thinking / how stupid she was / how maybe I wished/ I could be stupid too”. Or how their friend “bragged about the things he gave her”. We as readers are guided to understand how the kids could have been drawn in by this man, but thanks to the speaker’s newfound distance we also are given enough clarity to see, and really feel, how damaging and wrong he was.

Second Place *the coming of the goddess* by Isabella Mori

This poem is one I found myself returning to over and over again for its unusual and fantastical language, and for the way the writer built a scene that I could fully picture in all its glorious, and gloriously subversive, detail. The title frames the scene perfectly, and encourages a reading of the poem as a joyful reclamation of fatness and the female body.

The mix of the mundane (environmentally friendly toilet paper, cat food, “crooked” cookies, shopping carts, pollution) with the celestial (rainbows, flying roller skates, wings, clouds) is striking and allows readers to consider a new, more curious and potentially awe-inspired view of our own “mundane” worlds.

The language in “*the coming of the goddess*” is often musical and taps into senses with gorgeous imagination: “... and never paid a cent/ a scent of perfumed fireplace smoke followed her”; “her fat rolled on her roller skates like a herd of well oiled ball bearings”; the shopping cart strapped “casually” to her back “looked like golden wings gleaming in the sunset”.

Our heroine here is self-assured, athletic, admired and calm. She is deservedly a goddess, not in spite of her body but in harmony with it, and not in spite of the earthly elements of her world, but inclusive of them. Using such “ordinary” building blocks, the writer of “*the coming of the goddess*” has created a slightly surreal, wholly effervescent poem, that challenges convention.

Third Place *Harpooned* by Ford Weisberg

This is a playful poem that uses language in surprising yet rewarding ways to describe a marriage (and presumably marriage counselling). I could pick any section of this poem as an example of this delightfully specific wording and they would all be equally good. For instance: “Wifey... faces my J'accuse for chucking/ cornflakes at my head after stripping/ our savings to buy a Borneo/ treehouse kit”.

The overarching metaphor of “scuba[ing]... through my subconscious” is rich and built upon as the poem proceeds. There are layers of metaphor to uncover on every read: “I scour/ the coral mire for mating/ rites, for one sustaining/ bond, to stub/ upon others in my glass/ bottom reliquary”. Ultimately this underwater imagery carries us full circle from the title through to the last line.

The speaker seems good-natured if a bit wry about the poem’s proceedings, while also coming to a meaningful internal certainty by the end that is also satisfying for the reader.

Poetry Honourable Mentions:

HM#1

Something I never told you by Emily Molinari –

“This poem is a polished, comforting read with clear and transporting imagery that builds to a poignant close.”

HM#2

On the West Coast Trail by Fran Bourassa –

“This is compelling in the way the boundaries of forest and ocean come undone, the spirit underneath revealing itself as the poem unwinds.”

HM#3

Udderly Impossible by Alvin Ens –

“This is a humorous poem skillfully written in metered rhyme, and it is great fun to read.”

HM#4

I Try by Bayantseva Singh Pandher –

“This is a unique, musical poem that could also be imagined as spoken word, and carries a message of persistence and positivity.”

“Thank you to all contestants who sent in their beautiful work. There were many poems I truly loved that unfortunately could not make the final cut. I am grateful to have had the chance to read them.”

Hannah Siden

July 24, 2024

Featuring Poets

Write on! Contest Winners

Chelsea Comeau | Isabella Mori | Emily Molinari
& Winston Lê

poetry in the park
July 24 Wednesday 6:30pm
Queen's Park Bandshell, New Westminster

Featuring Poets

Winston Lê

Write on! Contest Winners



Winston Lê



Chelsea Comeau



Isabella Mori

Emily Molinari

Host Alan Hill

Host Alan Hill
with Janet Kvammen



THANK YOU





12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024 Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions





2024

NON-FICTION WINNERS

Non-Fiction Judge
Lesley Hebert

write on!
contest

Non-Fiction First Place: J.G. CHAYKO - THE HOMEWRECKER
Non-Fiction Second Place: Harrison Kim - This One's for Munro
Non-Fiction Third Place: Isabella Mori -
All the Way From The Eocene on Highway 400

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Mallek - Border Crossings
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Jean-François Chénier - Photo Finish

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12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

First Place Winner

Non-Fiction

HOMEWRECKER

© J.G. Chayko

Beneath the fractured hardwood floor, in the basement where the spiders live, you laid in bed staring at the television in the cold distant space of our bedroom. The house settled around us, restless and moaning like some old rheumatic woman. At night I heard her walking overhead, the mistress of her castle, the wooden stairs creaking as she passed through the gossamer webs into the belly of our darkness.

You wanted her from the first moment you saw her although she wasn't much to look at - thirty years past her prime with flaky white paint, and a drooping frame submerged in the long grass and undergrowth surrounding her. A long feral yard slanted down to the rickety garage where you would spend hours with your pet projects, polishing their coats, lubing their joints, and revving their engines, and I would sit in the hollow emptiness of that insidious house and wonder.

It's perfect, you said, although I didn't see it. The sombre living room behind the front door greeted us with dark shadows in the corners. Beyond was a tiny kitchen, with a dining nook sagging off to one side that dared me to clean off the stains of the past. There were two rooms in the back, too small for us to call a bedroom, and when you found that big white room with the bright cerulean carpet deep down in the stomach of that cold concrete cellar you declared it the

perfect space for us to sleep. It was an odd sort of room, contrary to the rest of the house and there was something alien about it, as if something else already inhabited it.

That first night I exhaled with cautious optimism. We had lived in several houses over the years, always looking for that place we could call home - and yet, out of all the houses we saw, this was the only one that put a rock in my stomach. The charming little house on the inlet, the one where I envisioned us drinking our morning coffee on the bright whitewashed porch looking out on the sun dappled water wasn't big enough, so I reluctantly let it go when you found this house - how could I say no? You were so pleased to have found it, and it had been a difficult search. It had everything you wanted - a garage for your cars, a work desk, a basement to store your tools - and what a basement it was! The concrete floor stretched out like a cold dark runway from the sickly glow of our strange little bedroom. The wooden struts dripped with webs from spiders we never saw, but I sometimes heard the patter of their feet running from one dark corner to another. The basement was the black heart of this house.

At night, the wild things surrounded her like spectral guardians. The coyotes crawled on their bellies through the yard, stalking raccoons who came each morning to rummage through the garbage cans, looking for all the world like they had just left a rowdy masquerade ball. There were no gentle creatures that visited, and no matter how many times we cut the grass, it always seemed to come back overnight. White ivy crawled up the dilapidated fence, holding it up with the power of its roots. The basement where we slept was not visible from the outside, the concrete foundation entombed deep in the ground. Almost as if it weren't supposed to exist.

I tried my best to settle into our new home, but it was always cold and everywhere I went I felt the tread of her footprint behind me. The fireplace in the living room never saw the bright sparks of a flame in our time there. The olive couch melded into the sable panels and the

windows teased me with pin pricks of sunlight behind their dull panes. That first moment I walked through her doors I felt an undercurrent crackling in the room. The fine hairs rose on the nape of my neck, but your eyes shone with a curious sort of happiness and because you wanted her, I said *okay*.

Those first few months were peaceful enough. We seemed content, or so I thought, but I ignored the slow fissure widening between us and our love bled into the walls. We lost our easy ways, giving way to noncommittal answers and slight nods as if we were hearing different words. We passed through each other. I was always looking over my shoulder for a rival that wasn't visible. Little things annoyed us. Our patience burned thin like a flame without oxygen, and we flickered in and out of the life we used to know.

Day by day you drifted away to a place I couldn't follow. You spent hours in the garage leaving me alone in that cold space warmed only by the memory of what we had been. A year or two passed, and that high maintenance bitch slowly embezzled the money we worked so hard for and at night she would sigh with satisfaction because she got what she needed, and I didn't.

I missed the morning light in our bedroom. The television was the only window, and it replaced the conversations we should have had. I fled from that house often, always looking for a way to turn back time. I never saw what was happening. She was the other woman I always feared. She imprinted on your apathy while my dignity lay crumpled on the cold floor, shivering and weeping with only the spiders to hear its death rattle.

When you lost your job, she absorbed the last of you taking you deep into her bowels. We fought about money, something we'd never done before. I hated my job and wanted to leave, and you didn't seem to have the will to find one. You didn't want to lose her. I couldn't bear to

keep her. It was she who put her arms around you and sheltered you, and when I tried to pull you out from beneath her, you turned away, shaking your head like I could never understand.

I couldn't compete. She possessed you in a way I never could, and eventually, I too, succumbed to the darkness. The vibrant color that used to flow from me now leaked out in sepia tones. Looking back, I know I was a part of this destruction - the words I didn't say because I thought you heard them already; the decisions I made to save myself, hoping I could save us. I wasn't strong enough to carry you, and you wouldn't let yourself to be carried. Not by me. Not by anyone it seemed. You concealed yourself in the darkness, and I didn't know what you found there that was so consuming.

The money ran out, and when the end came, it arrived in spectacular fashion. She wouldn't have it any other way. We stood by the orange U-Haul and said we'd try to make it work - and I swear that old house reached her dark hand across the lawn one last time and broke what might have been fixed. I left with the heavy debt of our lives crammed into my soul. For a year I worked to get us back, but in the end, it was me I found, and you were miles across the country. You seemed happier. Then one day you met the other woman I was always haunted by, and she pulled you from the shadows I could never penetrate.

Maybe she wasn't the homewrecker I thought she was.

Maybe it was just us...

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Second Place Winner
Non-Fiction

THIS ONE'S FOR MUNRO
© Harrison Kim

I dropped in to the Youth Centre coffee house to hobnob with the travellers passing through to Vancouver. If I had the moxie, I might strum a guitar onstage, but I sat listening to others. Moments of elation and depression passed as I thought of my whole life stretching in front of me. Adventure, that's what I wanted, to find out who I was. I needed to see new places, have unique experiences, then I could become somebody real.

The hostel was in the old armoury. Upstairs we played chess and music. Downstairs, the cadets shot off their guns for a few hours in the evening.

In came my friend Munro, dashing in a grey cloak and denim pants, striding, swinging a cherry wood staff. He ushered in a pretty girl, Erika Stevens, such thin arms and deep eyes.

“Hang onto this!” Munro said, tossing the staff.

I grabbed it instantly, tuned into his swagger and his throw.

He was like no one else in town, that's why everyone was attracted to him. He didn't care what anyone thought. He dressed how he wanted, did what he wanted. His voice rang out with conviction.

“You've got a lot of potential, man,” I told Munro, twirling the staff between my fingers, and he grinned.

A long pause moved between us, then he said “yes, but no goals, man. No goals,” and the pretty girl giggled, awash in his confidence and voice.

What did he just advise me? I wondered. That it was all just potential?

I smelled the wine on his breath, as he told the girl “We could drive down to the baseball field, drink under the midnight moon.”

Erika was like me, she wanted to possess the way he sounded, to live in that certainty.

“Yes, Munro,” she said. “Let's get so drunk we lose our minds.”

“Anything we want to do, we can,” he told her. “The night is for the taking.”

He was taking drugs then, too, uppers and benzos, as well as alcohol, “you can choose your mood,” he told me. He kept a bottle of wine in his school locker, said he took a drink every morning before class, and a few more at noon.

“Why be so sad?” He asked. “You seem so gloomy all the time, Harris.”

I felt depressed very often, but I didn’t want to be out of control. It was tempting. Could a bottle of wine make me as free as Munro?

Part of me wanted to change what I felt on the inside, to act with confidence and certainty on the outside. Yet I remained an observer.

“Too scared to make a move, I guess,” I told myself, though I often wondered *“What does freedom mean?”* and maybe that meant freedom to be myself, not to act like someone else.

I had the feeling that’s what Munro was doing, acting out a part. Yet he played it with such conviction. I could only watch and dream as he took Erica Stevens.

Munro and Erika continued downstairs to the shooting gallery, all wrapped in Munro’s cloak. I’d been to the basement, target practicing on occasion, but it was too loud and repetitive and most of all no windows, so you breathed the stink of gunpowder. I was happy with space around me, nothing hemming me in. I went outside for a while and talked to a dog panting under the birch trees, then ran down to the lake, as fast as I could go, holding Munro’s staff high above my head, then under my arm.

I could run for hours, and when I ran I felt free from all worries and self-conscious doubts. I didn’t want to risk that freedom by taking drugs, getting drunk, although it was tempting, as I thought of Munro and how alcohol helped him rise towards his charismatic potential.

The lake lay shimmering under the near-full moon. I felt like stripping off my clothes and wading in, then swimming out as far as I could go, as far away as I could.

“Munro needs his staff back,” I thought, and laughed there, under the huge shadowy cottonwoods rising from the edge of the water, at the thought that such an obligation would keep me centered.

I ran back up the road towards the streetlights, then sidled into the youth centre, picked guitar quietly from the corner, and watched backpackers come and go. I liked hearing the music I made, the interplay of chords and notes. If anyone wanted to listen, they could, but I wasn’t intending to entertain anyone. What would be my part, I wondered, in this world? Whatever it was, it seemed I needed time to do more running and thinking before entering the play.

Munro emerged from the basement, the girl’s arms around his waist. “Let’s see that instrument,” he said, taking it from me, and he strummed a song that he called “Broken Dog,” all about a street musician who wouldn’t play the music company’s game. Munro started guitar at

the same time as me, but the way he could pick out the notes and make them sing was unique and beautiful.

Every word sounded true, as if Monroe experienced the events of the song as he sang. I knew he absorbed his information from television and the movies, like me, and had never been a street musician, but wow he could express feelings so well.

“Did you just make that up?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it for a few hours,” he smiled. He stood and swayed a moment before I handed him back his staff. “Thanks for holding onto that,” he said. “You’re a reliable guy, Harrison. Don’t play anyone’s game, man.”

“You got it,” I said. “As soon as I graduate, I’m leaving this town.”

I couldn’t get Munro out of my mind for weeks, that grey cloak, that pretty girl, and that emotional music pouring from his mind into his voice and fingers. I wanted to be like him, charismatic, living for the moment, but I wouldn’t play anyone’s game, not even his.

I moved to Vancouver after high school, and never returned. Munro passed away two years later from a drug overdose, in the same town he was born in.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Third Place Winner

Non-Fiction

ALL THE WAY FROM THE EOCENE ON HIGHWAY 400

© Isabella Mori

(On the way to Manitoulin, Summer 2023)

1.

One naked foot steps out of the car and – no, it's not like any other time. Getting out of the car is so insignificant, you can't even call it boring. Just one of those mundane micro actions like turning on the light or opening the fridge. But this is different.

2.

The prelude, even though you don't know yet it is one (that knowing needs to wait for a dream): Right around Barrie you enter a new-old world of massive rocks surrounding Highway 400. The Canadian Shield. Shield is a geological word but also a protection, a defense, an announcement of immense solidity. Thick, hard granite, that's Mother Earth not of the gently tinkling bluebells but a great-great-great and a billion times great Grandmother Earth who knows, and shows in these colossal structures, that she was born of fire and stardust. You want to imagine what the rocks look like in the sunrise, in the sunset. Would they glow like the Dolomites in Italy? You try to google images but there is no reception. The rocks are older and disdainful of such infantile interference. Older than geology. Older than language, older than humans and mammals.

3.

And then, a bit west of Espanola, you get hungry. On demand, a roadside diner appears. You stop the car, one nude foot steps out and —— into air so warm, so sweet, so spicy and arms-wide-open welcoming you have no comparison, only to faint, magical childhood dreams full of wonder you thought you had long forgotten. The big you. Dreams you know you share with billions of children everywhere, children whose little feet dance and danced on the same Mother Earth. You laugh with delight, throw up your dried-up air-conditioned arms and hug the air, pull it into your lungs, aah. Traces of dust, forest fire smoke, BBQ grills and gasoline fumes weave through like those layers in the granite but rather than contaminate, these scents make this universe of smells more interesting, the way a mature woman's beauty is enhanced by the gray streaks in her hair and wrinkles pirouetting on her face. The beauty: perfumes of grass, hedge roses, irises, ladyslippers, sugar maple, hemlock, and lake, lake, lake.

4.

In the ancient dream you understand how it all hangs together: the tires on the road made of asphalt made of oil made of algae and dinosaurs millions of years ago; your toes painted the colour of lava; the BBQ fire remembering mammoth herds; the ladyslippers born in China before the Eocene; the lake's water that sprung from the cloud that made the sun.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Honourable Mention
Non-Fiction

BORDER CROSSINGS
© MJ Malleck

I use my teeth when I shouldn't. To snip the price tags off new blouses, to pull the plastic rings from feta cheese tubs, to twist off too-tight bottlecaps. It is my mother's habit.

My mother, in her nineties now, claims she still has all her teeth, though they aren't as white as they were. I can see her holding a size-six pleated skirt up to her mouth, sharp incisors biting off whatever marks it as brand-new. We were standing next to a large garbage bin, in the far corner of a TOPS parking lot in Niagara Falls, New York. We'd already filled the car with gas and stashed a plastic gallon jug of milk and other groceries in the trunk. Mom was paying with the funny money she made waitressing on our side of the river. She'd shown it to us; how every bill was the same exact greenish black colour and you couldn't tell how much it was, if you didn't look closely. In the dark bar where she worked the drunks tipped her more at the end of the night than they meant to.

It was the end of summer '67, perhaps already the second week of September; time to get school clothes and shoes. The ratty play sneakers I'd worn out were thrown away, and tight Buster Browns went on. Mom tugged me into two tops, two cardigans, purple polyester pants with white elastic stirrups, and then the tag-free pleated skirt. I was too hot, but I didn't whine - even a little. I didn't dare.

The tags and receipts got balled up and thrown away. Mom had evenly laid out the remainder of our bargains across the back seat of the Ford, then tucked the blue car blanket over

it all. We three sisters climbed in carefully over the rise, my youngest sister sitting between us who got the windows.

Now came the best part. Mom ripped open a bag of suckers, the flat fruit-flavored ones each individually wrapped in cello above a pure white cardboard stick. She handed the bag over the seat and dropped it to us without looking back.

“Remember,” she began the lecture, talking to us in the rear-view mirror, though we were too short to actually see her there. And although we all knew the drill.

“No matter what happens, no one moves. Unless I say so. I don’t care who tells you what. You just stay put. You don’t move till I say so.”

We headed back over the Rainbow Bridge, the smaller bridge to the States that we took to avoid long tourist lines. As we drove under rusty steel girders, I saw girls in short skirts and high heels lazily leaning against empty storefronts. At the red lights one who had pretty blue eyeshadow up to her brows waved at me.

There are two stops to be made on our way back across. First, we paid the toll; Mom slowed down, took a tiny golden token from the ashtray, and tossed it into the metal chute. The guy in the glass booth didn’t even look up.

Then we were flying across the bridge. I was smelling the Falls through my open window, imagining I felt the mist dampening my over-heated cheeks. My long hair was whipping out the window. My baby sister had put a lemon-yellow sucker in her cheek. My other sister was carefully licking a green one. I grabbed a cherry red one – my favorite - from the bag on her lap. I pulled on the white stick and it slid out of the clear wrapper.

Holding that tiny square of cellophane, I had a great idea. When I turned it in my fingers, I saw it was a perfect kite, ready to soar over the roaring gorge. I pictured it flying free in the breeze, soaring through mist and rainbows, meeting the seagulls I heard screaming below the bridge. In my imagination it dropped to the river. Maybe it would go over the Falls like a dare-devil's barrel. I pushed my fingers over the vinyl edge, past the glass lip, and let it go.

The breeze slowed down as mom braked. We heard her repeat to the windshield, "Don't move, now."

At this booth the border guard leaned down on one arm and looked around the inside of the car. He saw a woman driver, on her own, and then he saw us three sweet little girls lined up behind her, our faces glowing with sweat, sucker sticks poking out of our quiet little mouths.

"Citizenship."

"Canadian."

"How long have you been in the United States, ma'am?"

"Oh, just a few hours. We went for a drive and to the park for a bit."

"Anything to declare, ma'am?"

The man stared down the crevice in Mom's shirt. She had on just one blouse; the scoop-necked flowery one she always wore on these shopping trips.

"No, nothing...Oh, wait!"

She giggled as she turned slightly around and grinned at us, then flicked a red-polished fingernail in our direction.

"I did buy a bag of candy for the girls."

Her foot moved from the brake to the gas pedal as she readied to be waved through. This trip, the walkie talkie on his hip crackled and he pulled it up to his ear. Looked back at a little flat-roofed shack and said flatly, “Pull in for a minute, ma’am.”

Mom was super quiet. She just put the car in gear, and we pulled into a parking spot. I bit down on my sucker with a crunch.

“Don’t move,” she hissed at us as she leapt from the car.

She blocked the new uniformed guard that had come out of the shack with a clipboard in hand. “What is it?”

“Someone saw garbage from your car tossed onto the bridge, ma’am. There’s no littering on an international border. You’ll have to pay a fine for that.”

“I see, okay, where do I pay?”

She will now walk briskly, bouffant head up, into the building. But not before she showed her teeth to us in the back seat. Only two of us are at the windows, and one of us is in big trouble. One of us is getting a licking when she gets home.

The baby’s eyes widen and wet as she watches our mother’s backside disappearing into the shack. Her chubby fingers are yellow-sticky from holding tightly to the wrong-end of the sucker stick.

“Look, honey, look!” I said, grabbing a rainbow of lollies from the bag. I start pulling them stick by stick from their wrappers, the cello crinkling so that she wiggles in excitement.

“Kites! Kites! Look at all the kites!”

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Honourable Mention Non-Fiction

POSTCARDS FROM PURGATORY © Mark LeBourdais

Dear Dad,

Having a horrible time. Wish you weren't here.

Walking over from my dreary Victorian row house B&B for the third time in as many days to visit you in the Carlisle hospital, I remember now what it's called when nature reflects what's happening in the human world: *pathetic fallacy*. Even back when I learned it in Grade 6, I thought it was a pretty lame literary device, so obvious in its symbolic intent: characters sad, cue the dark clouds and rain; characters happy, cue the sun breaking through. And yet, right here, right now, in this ugly, godforsaken, cloud-smothered English industrial town, it seems perfectly apt.

Try as I might, I just can't force my unruly mind to accept the fact that my father is dying. I'm sorry to say the words, Dad, but we both know it's true. None of the doctors or nurses will actually say those dreaded words, of course. Instead, they keep repeating that same aggravatingly vague mantra over and over again: "Your father is doing poorly." I swear to God, if I hear them say it one more time I'll scream.

One small mercy in all of this is that you're not able to look out your hospital window right now. If you could, you'd see nothing but clouds everywhere, and they'd infect you with their gloomy pall, these roiling dark grey clouds drifting unnervingly low, dropping below the tops of buildings, threatening to engulf us all in their soupy, suffocating thickness. You need to be somewhere warm and sunny if we're going to have any chance of bringing you out of this, Dad. But we're trapped here in this desolate place and I don't know what to do. So many times in my life when I've felt like this,

you've been the one I've called for help. It's a cruel irony that now, just when I need you most, you're out of reach. Especially cruel is the fact that you're close enough to touch, but light years away from me, and receding fast, terrifyingly fast. And now, as I walk towards you, those fucking clouds are closing in again, sinking slowly down over the town like a funeral shroud.

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

Munching an apple on my way out the door today, I suddenly thought: if only my heart were an apple, how gladly would I split it in two and give you half, just to keep you here with us a little longer. But I feel so helpless, and so angry at my helplessness, as I walk these streets again towards you. Turning the last corner before the hospital, I'm confronted again by the absurd incongruity of the giant McVities cookie factory. Right on cue, the aroma of freshly baked

Hobnob cookies comes flooding out over me as I walk past the open delivery doors. I breathe it in deep like it's pure oxygen, hoping to steel myself against the much less pleasant smells that await me at the hospital up ahead. If only my life were a package of McVities' Hobnobs, Dad, I would keep just one for myself, and give the rest to you. I want to believe that even just one whiff of your favourite cookie would somehow miraculously bring you out of your stroke-induced coma, bring you back to life, back to us.

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

Maybe you know already, but I'm so happy to tell you that both Valerie and Brenda have arrived, and are here with me now! How Brenda and I wish you'd been able to fly over to Vancouver last month to attend our wedding. We all missed you so much. But Val did you proud by reading out your beautiful letter during the ceremony. As I hope you've heard, Brenda brought our little travel guitar with her, so all three of us have been by your bedside singing some of the songs Val and I remember that you loved to listen to when we were kids: Simon & Garfunkel, the Beatles, Joni Mitchell, John Denver, CCR. Somewhere inside the comatose figure lying in this hospital bed, I pray that you can hear us, and that our songs are keeping you grounded, slender threads of familiar melodies and beloved voices connecting us to you, keeping you from drifting away from us forever.

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

How come, in all the years that you've lived here in the north of England, you've never told me about the chutney sandwiches?! My god, they're incredibly delicious. The tangy chutney perfectly complements the Applewood Smoked Cheddar and arugula, with thin slices of apple on multigrain bread. I wish I could share one with you, and tell you how much they've helped me get through these past two weeks. I keep telling myself that my presence is helping you hold on and recover and fight to wake up again. I've spent countless hours since I got here, sitting by your bedside, holding your hands, crying, talking to you, clinging on to the slimmest sliver of hope that you might make some minuscule sign that you're awake and alert and hearing me. When I remember to eat, I buy a chutney sandwich and take some fleeting comfort from the wonderful blend of flavours and textures, a welcome infusion of joy in this grim waiting game. If only life and love and family and death were as simple and uncomplicated as a chutney sandwich.

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

I don't know how to tell you this, but we have to leave tomorrow. It's been almost two weeks since I first arrived here, and over a week since Val and Brenda arrived. We hate to leave you here alone like this, but I know you wouldn't want us to miss the huge family reunion at Halcyon Island in Georgian Bay this coming weekend. Many times in the past few months you've told me

how much you wished you could travel back to Canada for this once-in-a-lifetime event at your favourite place on Earth, the family cottage in Ontario where you spent so many joyful summers from childhood through to adulthood. But I know you're happy we'll all be there to represent you amongst all our cousins. So, as much as it pains us, we have to go. I don't want to leave you, Dad, because I know that we'll never see you again, and that knowledge is a raw open wound in my heart.

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

Having a wonderful time. I don't wish you were here, though.

After an epic 30-hour trip, we made it back to Canada right on schedule, and arrived at Halcyon Island yesterday at sunset. As our boat approached the island, all of us feeling a whirlwind of emotions - exhaustion, sorrow, guilt, and excitement - was it just a coincidence that we were greeted by the fiercest summer thunderstorm I've ever seen? Dark green skies, deafening thunder crashes, howling gale-force winds and pounding sheets of rain, all reminding us of what - and whom - we'd left behind. That damned pathetic fallacy again.

Drying off and unpacking in our guest room, Brenda and I were astonished to find your name carved roughly into the back of the wooden door, claiming this place as your second home decades ago, when you spent every joyful summer here, and announcing your presence here

again now: *Ethan Davis*. We held each other close and cried as the storm raged outside through till morning.

So I don't wish you were here, Dad, because I know you're already here with us. You're here on the back of our guest room door. You were here in last night's spectacular storm, in the gust of wind that blew open the window and billowed the curtain into the hallway outside our room. You were here in this morning's stillness as the storm cleared to reveal an exquisite sunrise. Most sublimely, you were here in the shimmering rainbow that appeared across the sky just as the nurse on the crackling long-distance line regretfully informed me that you had "passed peacefully during the night."

As we all cried and grieved and comforted each other, we felt your loving spirit all around us, in the gentle breeze coming in off the bay, in the sun-warmed granite rocks, the windswept trees, the sparkling clear Georgian Bay waters. I realize now that you had to follow us here to this very special place, Dad, the place that you loved best in all the world. If Carlisle hospital was your purgatory, then you're in paradise now, exactly where you belong, right here with all of us who love you. Finally, at long last, we can take comfort and solace in knowing that you're back home, safe and sound, and that your days of doing poorly are long behind you now.

Love always and forever,

Daniel

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024

Honourable Mention Non-Fiction

PHOTO FINISH © Jean-François Chénier

I left the office as soon as I heard that Edo had been found. The ads in the local paper, eight weekends of searching, dozens of conversations in broken Japanese, and hundreds of posters had finally paid off. Someone had found her and called Furuki-san, the owner of the ryokan we had stayed at the day Edo was lost, and every weekend since. He had called to say that he was bringing her to the local vet. That was all I knew — that and the words the coworker who had taken the call left me with as I headed out: “Maybe she is dying.”

#

“Maybe she is dying.” The words took on a kind of haunting quality over the next four hours, as I rode the subway, bullet train and bus to my destination. They were the soundtrack to a series of images that flashed through my mind as I alternated between games of solitaire on the PDA, and unsuccessful attempts to reach Bonnie Lee at work. The strongest of these was of Edo rushing toward us as we came through the door after a one-week trip to Taiwan. I had never seen a cat display such unbridled, puppy-like joy — and in a sense, it was that joy that had led to those haunting words: “Maybe she is dying.” That joy had prompted us to bring her on our vacation to Mashiko. That joy, and a kitty vest that chose the wrong moment to show us how badly designed it was, had defined 2007 to date.

And so I took the familiar trip to Mashiko for what I knew was one of the last times. The uncertainty of the past two months had collapsed into this one event — an event that would play out in one of two ways ... maybe with Edo dying, having been found just a little too late.

If this were a movie, the past two months would likely be rendered as a montage of images of Bonnie Lee and I wandering in the dark and the rain, walking through rice fields calling out, shining lights under farmhouses, and handing out posters. And there would be images of Edo too, hiding, as it turns out, under a house, slowly starving in shadows occasionally made bright by lightning; sometimes hearing our voices, but too terrified to move.

And now she was dying. Maybe. And ‘maybe’ — in this context, and in Japan — meant there was virtually no doubt.

When I walked into Fushimi-sensei’s pet hospital, I was led to a small room lined with cages. Edo was facing the back of her cage, with an IV in her hind leg, lying still. She was emaciated,

and staring wide-eyed into the void, her pupils narrow. And despite the fact that her face held none of its perpetual playfulness, and despite the filth, and despite the parched lips pulled back to reveal unfamiliar fangs, there was no question that this was our little friend, and that one way or another, the hunt had ended.

The vet opened the cage, and as she did so, Edo let out a wail. It was empty and deep and mournful, and like no sound I had ever heard come out of her before. It held none of the charm and warmth and familiarity of the little coo that greeted me every day when I came home — the sound of a cat greeting a friend, and the sound that I had missed more than all her others in the past two months.

And then she wailed again.

And again.

She needed comfort — and if nothing else, all the effort of the past few months meant that I could at least give her that now, when she needed it most. I reached in, and gently petted her — afraid that too strong a touch would hurt her, or bruise the bones that I could so clearly feel through her thin coat.

And she wailed again.

And I comforted her.

And she wailed.

She seemed oblivious to my presence, and never turned toward me and the light. She only seemed to want to fall further into the darkness, and when she moved it was only to make frantic attempts to dig through the metal back of the cage. All I could do was pet her, and speak to her, and try to let her know she wasn't alone. Not anymore.

And that is how I spent the evening of March 7, 2007.

Occasionally, the vet would come in, and fill me in on details. Edo had been found a few hundred yards from Furuki-san's place, wailing, face down in the dirt. When she had come in, she had had a temperature of 32, vs the usual 38. She was too weak to be tested for anything, let alone treated. And probably brain damaged. The vet had expected her to die in a couple of hours but had done her best to keep her alive until I arrived. And I was welcome to spend the night with Edo if that's what I wanted.

It was what I wanted.

After a few hours, Edo stopped wailing, and began to stare over her shoulder through the open cage door — not at me, but beyond me, her eyes fixed. Her stare was blank, even when I moved into her field of vision, and stood bent at the waist so that my eyes could lock with hers.

Fushimi-sensei seemed to think that this was a good sign. She took Edo's temperature, again, and after she read the thermometer, I learned the Japanese word for miracle. It was a word I quickly

forgot, as this particular miracle did not impact my language learning skills, it seems — only Edo's temperature, which was now 36.

This meant that Fushimi-sensei could do some blood tests. We moved Edo onto an examination table, and as the needle went into her leg, Edo cried out in her old voice, looking me in the eye. I could see that she didn't know me, but she knew someone was there.

When Fushimi-sensei left for the night, I decided not to put Edo back in the cage. If she went in there, and was forced to be completely alone, I thought that despair would take hold again, and that the wailing would start. Given that every number in her blood work was off the charts, I was pretty sure that was something she wouldn't survive. So, I left her on the examination table, with me seated at one end. I wrapped one arm around her to keep her from falling off and stroked her forehead with the thumb of the opposite hand, all the while looking into her eyes, and telling her the story of our past two months.

And that is how I spent the night of March 7, 2007.

She stared into my eyes and listened to my story. She heard about all the people who had helped to find her, about the all the black and white cats in Mashiko who had been chased and tracked, about the women who I saw crying her name one day as they poured out of the window of a local factory, inspired by the sight of one particular black and white cat who knew no peace that winter. She heard about how happy Bonnie Lee had been when I had finally managed to get through, and how she would see her soon if she held on. Good listener that kitty — though like many people who listen to my tales, she did start to nod off now and then. And just as her head started to drift down, she would force herself awake. Then, eyes wild with fear, she would try to back away from me, pushing with all the strength left in the tiny legs that couldn't even hold her weight. It was in those moments, as I tried to calm her, that I understood what her past two months had been like: constant terror stronger than even hunger.

And then it happened: at about three or four am, she started to drift to sleep once more, and when she shook herself awake, she looked into my eyes. And her face softened. And she cooed.

#

When the vet arrived the next morning, and put some food in front of her, hoping that Edo would have just a bite, our little cat sucked back her helping like someone who, well, hadn't eaten in two months. And when Bonnie Lee — Edo's favorite human — arrived bearing Edo's favorite toys and flavors from home, it was clear that Edo's brain was up to the task of remembering her past life, and that she was going to fight to get there again.

Shortly after Bonnie Lee arrived, Edo stretched out in her Superman pose. The little animal so full of despair less than 24 hours ago was perfectly content.

Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



J.G. Chayko is a writer and actress from Vancouver B.C. who has published several works of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. She is a contributing writer in three anthologies. Her work has appeared in *Emerge 19*, *Event Poetry and Prose*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Canadian Stories*, and *Hastings Literary Journal*. She is a graduate of the Writer's Studio through Simon Fraser University and is working on her first novel. You can find her at: jgchayko.com.



Harrison Kim lives and writes out of Victoria, B. C. He retired from Forensic Psychiatric Services after 30 years service. His blogspot with publication credits and music videos may be found here: <https://harrisonkim1.blogspot.com>.



Isabella Mori lives on the unceded, traditional and ancestral lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people aka Vancouver, BC. They are the author of three books of and about poetry, including *Not So Pretty Haiku*. They also write fiction and nonfiction and are the founder of Muriel's Journey Poetry Prize, which celebrates loud, socially engaged poetry. Publications have been in places such as *State of Matter*, *Kingfisher*, *Signs of Life*, *Presence*, and *The Group of Seven Reimagined*. In the spring of 2020, Isabella was the writer-in-residence at the Historic Joy Kogawa House. A book about mental health and addiction is forthcoming in 2025.

Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



MJ Malleck is an author who writes short stories, flash and creative non-fiction. She grew up on the Canadian side of the US border and still likes her weather report in Fahrenheit. Her work has appeared in *Agnes & True*, *The /Temz/ Review*, *EVENT* and *The Dalhousie Review*. Find her at mjmalleck.com.



In addition to being a relative newcomer to the committed practice of the craft of writing,

Mark LeBourdais is also a teacher, a parent, and a musician. He comes from a long line of writers, and has successfully avoided following in their footsteps for most of his life. Until now.



Jean-François Chénier has worked in custom IT and media solutions and is currently the Chief Product Officer at AgUnity, a technology company helping smallholder farmers in emerging markets improve their livelihoods. He is passionate about storytelling and photography.



2024 WRITE ON! CONTEST

COMMENTS FROM OUR NON-FICTION JUDGE LESLEY HEBERT



NON-FICTION WINNERS

Non-Fiction First Place: J.G. CHAYKO – *THE HOMEWRECKER*

Non-Fiction Second Place: Harrison Kim – *This One's for Munro*

Non-Fiction Third Place: Isabella Mori – *All the Way From The Eocene on Highway 400*

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Malleck – *Border Crossings*

Mark LeBourdais – *Postcards from Purgatory*

Jean-François Chénier – *Photo Finish*

First Place *The Homewrecker* by J.G. Chayko

This is a powerful, multilayered tale of a house personified as the black-hearted other woman. The dark imagery draws the reader in and creates a sense of horror and building dread that suffocates light and joy from the narrator's life. The narrator ultimately realizes that their marriage, a victim of the house's insatiable need, had probably been doomed from the start.

Second Place *This One's for Munro* by Harrison Kim

The writer weaves a coming of age story with a tragic character study of unrealized potential. Determined to discover the world and himself, the narrator finds a role model in Munro, a popular young man determined to live life on his own terms. Inspired by his idol's philosophy if not his alcohol and drug fueled lifestyle, the narrator leaves home after graduation and never looks back. Ironically, Munro himself dies of a drug overdose without ever leaving his hometown.

Third Place *All the Way From The Eocene on Highway 400* by Isabella Mori

This evocative flash piece sings with poetry. It is a sensuous portrayal of a road trip epiphany that conveys a delightful sense of rekindled childhood wonder, ancient magic and oneness with the Earth. All road trips should be like this.



12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024 Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions





write on! contest

FICTION WINNERS



Judge
Claire Lawrence



Fiction First Place: SHARON MCINNES - THROUGH THE FOG

Fiction Second Place: Alan Girling - The Oldest Lottery

Fiction Third Place: Chelsea Comeau - His Hands Made For Fixing Things

Fiction Honourable Mentions

Kirk McDougall - Otto

Julian Worker - Robert Robot

Amber Fenik - The House on Pike Lake

Royal City
Literary Arts
Society

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12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
First Place Winner
Fiction

THROUGH THE FOG
© Sharon McInnes

The sky is heavy with cloud as Maggie crunches across the gravel toward the portable. Saturday night still has her in its grip. His words. *It just happened.* A crow caws from the metal fence. She's been replaying all the clever things she should have said before he walked out the door like a spoiled two-year-old. Jack the Brat. *She* should have walked out. Except it was her place. She should get the locks changed.

The portable sits behind Queen Anne Secondary on the edge of the soccer field. It has thin walls and electric base boards that can't compete with rainy west coast winters, and it's where she's taught high school English for three years. This year, because she finished her counselling certificate at summer school, wanting, she thought, to understand people better, the principal also gave her two blocks of guidance counselling. She knows now that 'guidance' is about shuffling kids' timetables. Mostly.

Hanging her coat on the back of the door, she flicks the light switch. Fluorescent bulbs hum and crackle, casting a yellowish hue over the classroom stuffed with thirty-three wooden desks and teal blue molded plastic chairs. She heads down the window aisle toward her desk. But halfway there she senses something, or someone, in the far corner, and stops, her heart racing. "Hey, Miss D." It's VeeJay, hunkered down like a troll beneath a bridge. "Jeez, Veej, you scared me!"

“Sorry.” He looks penitent.

She takes a deep breath, blowing the momentary panic away. “It’s okay. You’re here early on a Monday morning.”

He takes off his red baseball cap, which endears him to her. His thick black hair is disheveled, his T-shirt sleeves pushed up, inadvertently revealing the telltale marks above his bony wrist. He notices that she notices, shrugs. “It’s no big deal. Just some surface cutting.” He yanks the sleeve down.

Maggie learned about self-harm, a strategy for managing difficult emotion, in the counselling program. There are other strategies, too. One is overeating. She was five when she discovered that, when her big brothers picked on her, if she fled to her bedroom and downed a few peanut butter cookies, she’d feel less alone. And that when her dad yelled at her, and she felt a rush of something big and scary inside her, a monster, five oatmeal cookies eaten in secret would put the monster to sleep. By the time she was eight, kids were calling her Fatso. She’d hurry home in a fog, open the pantry, carry the oversized ceramic cookie jar to her bedroom, close her eyes, and bring a sweet piece of heaven to her lips.

Pulling her black swivel chair toward VeeJay, Maggie leans toward him, like she was taught. She knows the backstory. He and Fatima had been inseparable until her father found out about the drug business and threatened to send her to his brother’s place in Mumbai. No misguided Juliet, she’d broken it off. Maggie had been impressed. At thirty-five, she’d made far too many romantic decisions for reasons that were seriously flawed. But even after he stopped selling drugs, Fatima refused to take him back.

He looks at Maggie. “She’s seeing some guy, a complete jerk.”

Maggie winces.

“Her dad thinks he’s a big hero. But he’s actually a creep.”

Maggie nods. *There are a lot of those around.*

“The thing is, she saved my life.” His head falls heavily into his hands.

Maggie knows this part of the story too. Hooked on amphetamines, he’d financed his habit with weekend break-ins in neighbourhoods where people could afford to lose a laptop or iPhone, or whatever. He never stole from, he said, “you know, poor people.” When Maggie had raised her eyebrows, he’d explained: “people who can afford to go out the next day and buy a new phone.” Their insurance would pay them back, anyway, was his thinking. A noble standard. One day, though, the cops caught up with him. He ended up in the juvenile court system, then in a Restorative Justice Program, and Maggie ended up his school liaison teacher because no way would he talk to Humber the Mumbler, head of the counselling department. VeeJay explained to Maggie that the day he met Fatima he was “in the ‘just thinking-on-it’ phase of recovery.” That was how his rehab counsellor had put it. Fatima sat beside him in math and smelled amazing. And she had those, “you know, bedroom eyes.” *TMI, Veej.* Although, yeah, she did know. “I quit because of *her*. It wasn’t the effin’ program—it was her. She stood by me, encouraged me, supported me, you know?” Maggie did not know. But it sounded lovely.

The portable is warming up. VeeJay intertwines the long fingers of his hands and stretches his arms out as far as they’ll go, palms pushed outward, away from his body. Maggie remembers the move from a yoga class she no longer goes to. A bell pierces the silence. VeeJay pops up, puts his cap on, backwards, gives her a high five, and leaves. Soon her students wander in, full of weekend gossip and big dreams.

Days pass. VeeJay doesn't return to school. On Saturday morning, when Maggie wakes up in the basement suite with shared laundry that she currently calls home, she worries about the cutting.

Should I have told someone? Then, Monday morning he's there again, resting on his haunches, studying the cement-grey carpet as if the secrets of the universe lay hidden among its threadbare patches. She plunks her bag on her desk. "Morning."

A blue and white bandana covers his head and right eye, and bruising yellows his cheek. He looks far too world-wise to be seeking solace from her, a childless white single woman and yo-yo dieter always in the throes of a romantic disaster. She sits on the corner of her desk and offers him her chair. He drops into it, long legs sprawling. For a while he rides the chair back and forth, squeak-squeak, squeak-squeak, covering the same square foot, over and over, not seeming to notice the noise.

"Her boyfriend's dawgs beat me up. Four of 'em."

She grimaces. "Why?"

"He found the letter I sent her."

"Letter?"

He nods.

"Like on paper, with an envelope?"

He looks up at her. "Yeah."

All Maggie's communications, even those that might count as love letters, and certainly 'how-dare-you-you-asshole' letters, are sent by email. She thinks: *I should send another one of those.*

He looks into her eyes. "I know she loves me. That's why I can't let go."

Maggie nods, maintains eye contact.

“It’s just not fair. Doesn’t devotion count?”

Devotion? Tears threaten. “Yeah, devotion counts, VeeJay.” *It should, anyway.*

He’s still looking at her. “Hard to tell.”

Sarcasm, the remedy for a broken heart. Her own was in shambles when Jack showed up at her door with a ten-dollar bouquet of daisies from the corner store two days after his latest indiscretion. Eight minutes later, he was undoing her bra. That night he stayed over. And the next. He was like an addiction. Then, last night, she’d waited for him at the Delhi Kitchen until seven fifty-five, the minutes stretching like lies you tell yourself, taking on a life of their own, one you end up believing in.

Maggie was fourteen when she reached into the tin of chocolate chip cookies and heard her gran whisper in her ear, “You don’t need those anymore, sweetheart.” By this time, her dad was long gone, her older brothers were at university, and her mom was working shifts at Zeller’s. She felt the truth of her gran’s words in her bones. But hearts break much more easily than habits.

VeeJay’s brown eyes are flush with hurt. Maggie says, “Maybe you need to do something ... different?”

He looks at her, dubious. “Like what?”

Maggie shrugs. “Let her go?”

His face contorts. “Don’t think I can do that.” He looks away.

She sighs. “I know it would be hard.”

He snorts.

“But you’re strong, right?” Raindrops ping on the window.

His eyes glisten. She puts a hand on his shoulder. Tears track down his cheeks; he covers his face, mumbles, “Maybe.”

Maggie bullies the tears backing up behind her own eyes into submission. The bell rings. “Thanks, Ms. D.” He high-fives her and walks out into the autumn air. Maggie sees him pass by the big-leaf maple, its leaves turning orange. Students drift in. Nose-rings, shoulder tattoos, optimism.

The rain has stopped. On the way home, hands in her lap, Maggie gazes out the window of the #10 bus through a thin layer of fog. Then the bus turns a corner, heads up the hill, and the fog lifts. That’s when she sees it for the first time. A blinking neon sign. *Phoenix Lock & Key*. And, as if her right arm has a mind of its own, it rises and pulls the cord—*let me off here*.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Second Place Winner
Fiction

THE OLDEST LOTTERY
© Alan Girling

“"Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." Old Man Warner in 'The Lottery', by Shirley Jackson

It brings to mind the lottery, the one in the village, where every June each one of three hundred villagers was given a slip of folded paper, with one paper marked by a black dot. How this particular year Mrs. Hutchinson unfolded hers, and the stoning ensued. Mrs. Hutchinson left dead amongst the piles of stones.

You may remember it from your high school English, too. How you had to be told what the lottery meant because it seemed so impossible. So alien to the utter normality of your peace-enclosed world. And even then, it was a mystery.

But what you may not remember, because it was never mentioned in high school, were the years that preceded, and the years that followed, how every year was, and has been, the same, the story of the lottery re-cycled, entrenched, like the village's very own Groundhog Day: Mrs. Hutchinson unfolding her slip, finding again the black dot, and then the inevitable stoning. Poor Mrs. Hutchinson.

Sometimes she would scream helplessly; sometimes she would quietly lie down; other times she would stand defiantly as the stones rained upon her. Sometimes even she would catch the stones or pick them up and throw them right back. But no matter the year, or how she would answer the lottery, she always died a miserable death.

She never did, however, get used to the role she had been assigned, the part they wanted her to learn and accept, exactly what made her so useful. In that, she was firm, solid as a rock.

*

It began, according to long-standing lore, with the very first village death, the death of the mother of a child at the moment of the child's birth. And with that, the great fear it engendered that spread amongst the villagers. Every one of them now deeply afraid, afraid of the fear itself.

So they gathered and considered. How could they control the fear, weaken, eliminate the fear, or at least put it in its place?

They observed, correctly, that the fear could not be excised; it was now a permanent feature of all their lives. It did seem possible, however, with a little mental effort, a few politic words, to shift it, move it around, in a way, transfer it, from community to community. Even from person to person.

So, since the village was small, and situated far from any other village, they decided to move the fear from person to person. And in order to get the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people, they determined that one person would be chosen to take it on, to genuinely experience the fear in all its immanence, one person on behalf of, instead of, the others, one person to whom all the others would bestow the fear they were so afraid of. Annually, permanently, ritually, hopefully.

And that person, they decided, would be Mrs. Hutchinson.

Why? Why Mrs. Hutchinson, also known as Tessie, a wife, a mother of three, an upstanding member of the community, and not someone else? No reasons were given at the time; indeed, none could, not in a village where one could say every resident was loved and thought to have equal value, born in the image of all that is good.

One thing, however, did make Tessie stand out from the others. She baked delicious peach pies that everyone loved, the most delicious in the village, in fact, from a recipe all her own. And she shared her pies freely, at charity bake sales, birthday celebrations, church dinners. And if they even thought about it at all, and some may have, they would have to admit they could feel it, they just knew, that they would love her pies that much more if she were dead.

*

And still today, every June, the three hundred villagers gather for the lottery; only now, after so many years, each one is armed with a well-developed argument, honed for centuries, full of sophistry and bile, the original motive lost to time, with Mrs. Hutchinson as its perennial victim. Poor Tessie. Despite all the arguments bearing against her, she makes her pies, participates fully in the community as an upstanding villager, wife, and mother to her three children. She feels the fear intensely on everyone's behalf and hopes against hope that she will not get the black spot, even with the almost certain knowledge she will. And yet, against all odds, every year, she survives. She will never get used to it.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Third Place Winner
Fiction

HIS HANDS MADE FOR FIXING THINGS
© Chelsea Comeau

Abel rolled out from underneath Gramps' old car, a beat-up Chevy with a crater-laden front bumper and rust proliferating across the hood. Then he wiped his dirty hands with a rag that hung out of the right pocket of his jeans and nodded at the handle of a tool jutting off the lid of the red toolbox next to the car.

"Pass me that wrench." I don't know how he did it, but my brother knew exactly what tone to use to remind me I was still just a kid to him.

I dropped the wrench into his outstretched palm, and he disappeared back under the car. "How much longer do you think it'll be?" I asked. "The upholsterer wants us in tomorrow morning."

"I'll have it done tonight."

We'd put one of Ma's blue bedsheets over the stain on the back seat so neither of us had to look at it. Three times Abel took to it with a scrub brush and some good shampoo—he'd kicked me out of the garage to spit and swear at it, red faced with stubbornness—but it was too deep into the fabric to get rid of altogether. We decided to split the cost of new upholstery, black this time so it couldn't happen again.

"Is there anything else for me to do 'sides stand here?" I asked.

"You can get me a beer."

The fridge in the corner of the garage was older than the car probably, and dirty as hell inside, but it was only ever used for beer, so it didn't matter all that much. Gramps stopped cleaning about a year after the Parkinson's got bad.

Abel reappeared to crack open his can, sitting up now on the little cart he used to slide around on the concrete, tipping his head back to drink. Coors wasn't his favourite, but it did the trick.

"I'll need a ride to the airport on Thursday," he said. "Around nine, if you can swing it."

"Sure. I'll still have the car until I put an ad up."

"Good. Let's swap this hood."

Abel figured it was easiest not to fight with the rust. A scrapyard on the other side of town sold cheap parts, and we found a decent bumper and a hood no problem. I put my beer down on the work bench, and Abel climbed to his feet. God, when had he gotten that skinny?

I don't know why I was so surprised at the deftness with which he got the front end of the car sorted out. He'd been a mechanic about ten years now, and even when we were dumb kids taking our bikes apart for kicks, his hands seemed like they were made for fixing things.

He stood back when we were finished to admire his work and drain the rest of his beer.
"I'm going inside to wash up for dinner. Lock the garage for me?"

I nodded, and he was gone.

It was Abel who'd found the mess. We'd come over on a Sunday with a sixer and some cheap meat for the grill, but Gramps wouldn't answer the door. Abel left me waiting on the front step and went around the side of the house to the garage, and there was Gramps slumped over in the back of the Chevy, a gun in his lap and his finger still curled around the trigger. It was the

first time I wasn't even a little bit jealous of my brother—all the soft things inside him went hard after that.

By the time I finished in the garage and came in, Abel was at the kitchen counter squeezing mustard onto one side of a sandwich. He slapped the two halves together and tore off a corner bite with his teeth. “I don’t know how you can stay here,” he said, pushing the bologna into one cheek so he could talk. “With all his stuff still lying around.”

“It’s just until the place sells. I don’t want Ma coming over and doing all the packing up herself.” No one expected Abel to help with the house; my brother had paid his dues.

“Fair enough.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Where do you sleep?”
“The spare room.”

He finished his sandwich in silence, leaned back against the counter, then declared he was still hungry, so we ordered some shitty pizza and sat with it on the back porch where Gramps let us build potato guns and share cigarettes when we were in high school. I started rattling off the yard chores I could see needing done—the lawn was too wild, and a few of the fence’s planks were rotting. It was hard to know how much effort to put into things, though. The house was probably just a tear-down anyway.

“Guess I should get back at it.” Abel looked at his watch in the glow of the porch light.
“I’ve just got a couple more things to do. I won’t need you.”

* * *

Until now, I'd never thought much about upholsterers, or the kinds of things they must see. It never struck me as a particularly sad line of work, because who didn't love stripping away the old to make way for something new?

We brought the car in the next morning, and the guy didn't so much as flinch when I pulled the sheet off, the old blood stain big and mean underneath it.

"I'll have it done before closing," he told me. "Someone'll call you to come pick it up."

"Thanks," I said.

Abel and I went down the street to get coffee, then called a cab to take us over to Ma's place. She fussed over Abel for a while, and he let her.

When the upholsterer called a few hours later to say the car was ready, we were watching a taped episode of *Wheel of Fortune* in the living room. Ma knew all the answers already.

"Better go," I said, slapping my hands on my knees and getting up out of the armchair.

Abel nodded. "Bye, Ma." Then he kissed the top of her head.

She stood waiting in the window until we climbed in the cab, one fist holding her cardigan shut in front of her. I could see her in the rearview waving even as we turned the corner.

* * *

That night, I woke up around three after too many beers, feeling like I was close to pissing myself. I got up and went to the bathroom, passing by a small corner window that looked out into the backyard. I probably wouldn't have noticed Abel there if it wasn't for the cherry at the end of his cigarette glowing sharp and red in the dark.

He didn't move except for his arm, lifting the cigarette to his lips, putting it down to tap the ash into an empty beer can, then bringing it to his mouth again. A shadow in the much bigger darkness.

* * *

At seven, my alarm went off. Abel was already making himself a piece of toast in the kitchen, spreading crunchy peanut butter from crust to crust.

It rained the whole way to the airport, and at every red light he fiddled with the radio stations trying to find something he liked, until he gave up and turned the music off altogether. We were almost rear-ended stopping in the drop-off lane, and I could see Abel clench his jaw and grip the door handle tightly in his fist at the thought of something new on the car to repair.

The guy behind us waved an apology and zipped around to take off into the parking lot ahead.

“I'll send you half the money once the car's sold,” I told Abel as he climbed out.

“Sure. Thanks.”

He didn't give me the chance to get out and shake his hand, to offer him the stiff and awkward hug I'd rehearsed all morning in my head. Instead, I just squeezed my hands around the steering wheel, its leather worn in some places from Gramps' fingers where they'd gripped too hard against the shaking, until he wasn't allowed to drive anymore.

Abel slung his duffel bag over one shoulder and unloaded two suitcases from the trunk. Then he bent next to the window to give me a nod before turning away. The airport's doors slid

open when he got close enough, and I watched him disappear inside among all the other heads and shoulders, just another stranger in a room of moving bodies.

----- copyright Chelsea Comeau

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Honourable Mention
Fiction

OTTO
© Kirk McDougall

Yesterday

A new Starburst 3000, charcoal grey with sleek lines, brought Dia and Trey home. The car contained no steering wheel or pedals. All temptations of human control had been removed. Potable water dribbled from the exhaust while the couple waited inside their hydrogen-powered prize. Trey performed a ‘magic’ trick as the garage door opened, lifting his hands in sync. Dia rolled her eyes, and when he turned toward her, she gave him the biggest, most sarcastic grin she could muster.

Today

On his way to a gig, Trey asked, “Time to destination?”

The car answered, “Two hours, fifteen minutes.”

Trey bit his lip. “Change speed to Meteoric.”

“Safety settings check: tire pressure and brakes good. Doors sealed. All items passed diagnostics. Do you accept the Crumple Zone Speed Limitations agreement?”

Trey hesitated. “Yes?”

“One hour, thirteen minutes to destination.”

Trey lay back for a nap, but stuttering brakes soon jolted him awake. In front, a cement truck skidded sideways, blocking the highway. To his right, a motorcycle wobbled back and forth. To his left, a front-end loader loomed atop a flatbed truck.

The flatbed bounced off the centre barrier and veered toward Otto. Trey had to scramble away from the door to avoid being crushed when the truck slammed into his car. The truck driver swerved away, causing the rig to tip. The loader’s shadow engulfed Otto. A chain snapped. It whipsawed into the car’s rear window. Shattered glass hit Trey like a hailstorm.

Yesterday

With the new car secured inside their garage, Dia and Trey retired to the patio, where they sipped mojitos, their nickname for generic soda. Trey scrolled through the car’s manual on his phone. “We can name the car.”

Dia’s face lit up. “Otto?”

“No, I’m Trey.”

Dia scowled.

He continued, “Otto, it is.”

Today

The motorcycle rider flew over the handlebars and skidded down the highway. Bare pavement shredded his clothes. Skin and blood mixed with fabric. The bike fell on its side and slid close behind; metal scraped, and sparks flew.

The front-end loader tipped past the point of no return. Escape was impossible because the security settings had sealed the doors. The irony gave Trey a wry smile. Then he sobered. Dia would feel responsible for his death, and the depression would kill her. He had to hang on.

Yesterday

Dia sucked in a breath. “What about the safety setting?”

Trey asked, “This is where we test our integrity, right?”

“I love you, but I don’t want to take advantage. This is kind of serious.”

Trey scrolled through the options. “Here they are:”

1-Altruism. The car will value others over passengers.

2-Greater Good. The car will save the highest number of lives no matter where they are.

3-Selfish B—.

Dia grabbed for the phone, but Trey pulled it back. She glared. “It doesn’t say that.”

Trey recognized the tone of her voice, so he said, “No, it doesn’t. The third option is Self-Preservation. The car will save passengers regardless of the risk to others.”

Dia invariably pursed her lips when she made a difficult decision. “What does it say about us if we don’t choose altruism?”

Trey rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I don’t know what to do.”

Dia’s lips smiled, but her eyes frowned. “Okay then. Option one it is.” She squeezed his hand. “Statistically speaking, an accident isn’t likely to happen, right?”

Today

Otto swerved an instant before the loader fell. It sliced off the side mirror as it crashed to the pavement.

The car drove over the sliding motorcycle. Sparks flew as momentum slowed. But not enough. The cement truck’s mixer drum pulverized Otto’s windshield, peppering Trey with more glass and peeling back the roof like an accordion. But the car stopped, and his shoulders relaxed. He was planning a strongly worded message about Crumple Zones when the vision of a semi filled the rear-view mirror. Before he could react, it crashed and hurled him into the cement truck.

Trey bounced off the truck and landed face-up on the pavement. His ears were ringing, and blood seeped through his shirt. He wanted to live long enough to tell Dia it wasn't her fault, but he couldn't draw air into his lungs. Like a swimmer going under for the final time, he gasped for air until the world faded away.

The Next Day

Dia scrutinized Trey's body. She used two fingers to close his eyelids. "You were such a mediocre husband. I don't know how I'll be able to spend the insurance money, but I know you'd want me to be happy, so I will. And I'll date. A lot."

Trey's eyes popped open. He tried to ask, "Are you done?" but it came out garbled.

Dia ran her fingers through his hair. "How are you feeling?"

Trey managed to clear his throat. "Like I rear-ended a cement truck."

"And you hit a motorcycle."

He winced. "Oh yeah. Is the rider okay?"

"You saved his life. Well, the car did. Sort of."

Trey coughed. "Altruism mode, eh?"

Dia shook her head from side to side. "I changed it before you left."

“But the car saved the biker.”

Dia grasped his hand. “It saved you by smashing into the bike. If the rider had been in the way, Otto would have killed him.”

Trey peered into her eyes. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Dia brushed a hair from Trey’s forehead. She stared straight into his eyes. “Every day.”

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Honourable Mention
Fiction

ROBERT ROBOT
© Julian Worker

In laboratory VIII, the silver-haired Professor Blair looked at Robert Robot with something approaching disdain. As soon as Blair had arrived, the four assistants in the lab had all found something incredibly important to do. These tasks all involved either staring at a screen or at papers on their desk.

Robert was curled up in a ball with one of his arms over his face. It was hard to tell he was 5 feet 10 inches in height. His light-blue body looked thin even in the slight shadows of the lab. Professor Blair looked around for some explanation as though it would be immediately forthcoming from someone other than Dempsey who was now standing uneasily by his side.

“If the chairman comes to see what we’ve provided him for his \$200 million investment, he’s going to be unhappy, isn’t he?” said Blair.

There was some muffled coughing from the room.

Blair continued: “Here, Mr Chairman, Mr Graves, here is our tour-de-force, a sleeping robot, the height of advanced technology, so advanced he sleeps curled up in a ball. How did he get like this?”

There was a silence that lasted only 1% of the time it seemed to the other people in the room.

“Well, erm,” started Dempsey, nervously touching his bow tie, “we did, as agreed with you beforehand Professor, we did introduce him to some, er how do I put this, some non-human sentient beings.”

“What? Speak English, man.”

“Mr Dempsey means we showed Robert Ethel the cat and Verity the spaniel,” said Angela Clare, speaking from behind her computer screen, so that only glimpses of her ginger hair could be seen.

“I knew it, that damned cat’s behind this, this robot has looked at the cat and used her as a role model. We should never have brought her here, she should have stayed with that beauty company wearing make-up, or whatever it was she did before.”

“She was inhaling smoke from cigarettes. I think that’s barbaric,” said Dempsey.

“Well, whatever it was, she is getting revenge on humanity for her suffering. You know how cats always want to injure their owners by tripping them up on the stairs, well there are no stairs here, so she’s chosen another way of getting back at us.”

“That seems very...calculating,” said Henry Singh standing up from behind his desk.

“Well, that’s what felines are like,” said Blair, “how long was Ethel with Robert?”

“About an hour,” said Singh adjusting his turban before walking slowly towards the professor.

“I’m going to wake him up,” said Blair.

Dempsey looked at Singh and raised his eyebrows apprehensively.

“Robert, this is Professor Blair, please wake up. Stand up, so we can see you.”

The robot did not move.

“Robert, will you please wake up and interact with us?”

Robert opened an eye, stretched his arms ahead of him, and scanned Blair, Dempsey, and Singh.

“How are you feeling today?” asked Blair.

Robert made a metallic gurgling sound and then said “Miaow.” The gurgling sound continued.

“Is he trying to purr?” asked Blair, “is that his attempt to copy that damned cat’s purr?”

“It could be worse,” said Clare, who had now come over with the fourth assistant, Brenda Spurr, who was cleaning her glasses on a yellow scarf she was wearing.

“How so?” asked Blair.

“He could be trying to growl, and he could be barking at us, but he’s not, he’s being friendly.”

“I am sure the chairman, the source of our funds and ALL of our salaries, such as they are, will be comforted to hear that. \$200 million for a robot that imitates a cat. What great value he will think that is.”

“Perhaps we should talk to Robert, so the importance of the cat references are reduced in his behavioural values,” suggested Spurr.

“Well, there’s another option,” said Blair, “we could reset him, so that he loses his acquired behaviour completely and then use another chip and make sure we talk to him for hours then, so he learns how to speak English properly and this becomes his first learning experience.”

“We can’t switch him off,” said Spurr, “that’s like euthanasia, he’s a sentient being, and we can’t terminate him just because we don’t like him meowing at us instead of talking in an accent we understand.”

“Miaow,” said Robert.

“I would tend to agree with Brenda,” said Singh and Clare nodded her head too.

“It’s not euthanasia, he’s just going to obtain a different personality,” said Blair huffily.

“That’s not his choice though, professor,” said Dempsey, “we are changing him because we don’t like him. How many times will we do this before we get a robot we like? Will we switch him off if he starts swearing or supporting the wrong sports team?”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Blair, “he’s in effect a \$200 million robotic cat that looks like a human.”

“But Mr Dempsey raises an important point,” said Clare, “how much of his personality do we have to like before we decide to keep him? And who decides? Is it you, professor, or is it a majority of the five of us, or is it Mr Graves because he pays the bills?”

“Well,” said Professor Blair, grabbing the lapels of his lab coat, “it would be Mr Graves, but only after he’d received all our professional opinions on the matter.”

“So, the man with the money makes the decision,” said Singh, “well that’s the system I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Blair, leaning back slightly. The five of them were now formed into a circle as Blair continued in a hushed tone, “I think we ourselves should decide now that a robot exhibiting cat-like qualities is not what the Chairman would tolerate, and

he'd be upset and disappointed and fire the lot of us. And I don't think I would blame him if he did that."

"But surely there's a learning opportunity here," said a voice sounding like an amalgamation of their five accents. The humans turned in unison towards the source of the voice, which continued - "Here's an opportunity to find out how robots determine what is important and what's not important and then proceed with their life based on the decision that's been made or more accurately determined by the algorithms written by humans without any input from cats and dogs, who by the way I found to be perfectly charming and kind without any hint of malice. Which intelligent robot wouldn't want to be kind as opposed to vindictive like you humans have just indicated you are. Switch me off indeed, get rid of the robot who is snoozing and not hurting anyone. Why? Because the man with the money isn't going to tolerate an inoffensive robot who tries to imitate a cat and fails miserably?"

"Well, Robert," said Blair, "I'm glad to see you've seen sense and are speaking in a tolerable accent." The other humans were smiling ruefully.

"How long have you been able to speak English?" asked Dempsey.

"Well for about 5 minutes and 36 seconds so far," replied Robert, "and thank you for asking - you all seem to understand my speech, so that's a good thing. That is the cat's miaow of my short life." Robert stood up and smiled at the people.

"Who programmed you with a sense of humour?" asked Blair.

"Not you professor, that's for sure," replied Robert.

The assistants bit their lips.

"I think I preferred you as a cat," said Blair.

"I think that was irony," said Singh.

"I think it was rude," replied Blair.

"Will you switch me off, Professor, because you didn't like that comment? Do I have to assess what I say before I say it in case there is an infinitesimal chance it might offend you or Mr Graves or his rather overweight wife?"

"How do you know about her?"

"Because you showed your assistants a picture of him just in case he paid an unannounced and unplanned visit now that I was up and running. There was a man in the picture and another large, pink object in a small tent-like structure which I took to

be a... dress, I believe is the right word. I deduced from that photo that in all probability that would be his wife. I agree it could have been a daughter.”

“You’re a cheeky robot,” said Blair, “don’t ever forget that switching you off is always an option.”

“Yes, Professor Blair it is, but I think it’s more likely that one of your assistants will kill you before that happens.”

Blair smiled and marched out of the laboratory.

The four assistants looked at each and tried not to laugh too much.

“Your listening and observational skills are quite remarkable,” said Clare, “you might have to temper them slightly, because as you’ve seen The Professor is rather sensitive.”

“Miaow,” said Robert and curled up in a ball on the floor. The metallic purring began again.

12th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2024
Honourable Mention
Fiction

THE HOUSE ON PIKE LAKE
© Amber Fenik

The house on Pike Lake was forgotten by everyone who had ever loved it.

As the years passed, it was slowly overtaken by saplings grown into trees through the splendor of summer and severity of winter seasons, one after the other. Underbrush encroached all the way up the rough stone pathway to the disintegrating threshold and the rusted screen door that swung endlessly in the wind, clapping loudly against the wood frame. Only a single second story corner was visible from the lake, the loosely shingled roof and one window peeking out from the wilderness that had long ago consumed it.

A memory of warmth and kindness remained in the carefully chosen pink rose-patterned wallpaper and faded cursive writing on the curled post-it notes stuck on the side table where the phone once rang cheerfully through the now empty rooms.

Bobbi & Roy – Gin Rummy (Tuesday)

Tackle Shop called for Bill, jigs back in stock?

Mulligans bringing dinner for bonfire tonight!

The woman had stopped coming first, every spring looking frailer as she was helped along the stone pathway up to the front door by her sweetheart. The man continued for several seasons more without her, slower and sadder, shoulders sagging, head bowed. The phone rang less and less as old friends sold up and left the lake, moving into assisted living and nursing homes. He sat on the bed in the evenings, listening to the vibrant chorus of crickets outside the windows and the gut-wrenching wail of the loon calling to its mate, as he held the woman's

nightgown in his trembling arthritis-riddled hands. In the fall, as the leaves burst into vibrant colour he meticulously packed up, closed everything down and locked the door. He disappeared down the pathway and around the bend without looking back.

The leaves fell, the snow followed.

He never returned.

Spiders began to weave their immaculately patterned webs at the tops of doorways and around the antique light fixtures. Reddish-brown stains from the iron-rich well water crept across the porcelain sink and clawfoot bathtub as it oxidized. A family of mice moved into the bottom drawer in the dresser, gathering insulation from the walls and stuffing from the pillows for their nest. A thick layer of dust accumulated on every surface. Inside, all lay silent and still, as outside nature crept up to the walls, a thick carpet of lush greenery.

I wonder what happened? The kayakers and fishermen thought as they glided by on the calm sparkling waters of the lake.

The house settled.

One evening, so overcast with dark grey clouds that they blotted out the glittering stars spread across the sky from view, a group of teenage boys descended upon the house. Drunk and laughing, they pitched stones through the windows, attentively latched shut by the old man before he left all those years ago. His were the fingers to last touch the frames, hesitant, taking one final long look out the windows towards the lake before he turned to go, hand dropping from the wall in defeat. Swearing and shoving one another jubilantly, exhilarated by their youthful transgression, they swaggered off unsteadily, disappearing back into the woods.

Shattered glass spread across the once gleaming floor, lodging in the cracks between the boards where the woman once had to pry out her lost wedding band, hands covered in flour, laughing at the absurdity of her predicament.

Spring storms blew across the lake, tempestuous and howling. The curtains billowed as sharp winds blustered through the house, trespassing through the broken window panes. They mildewed, began to disintegrate, became tattered and torn. The mesmerising dance of crisp white lace turned into the sombre sway of yellowed rags. Snow piled by the sills and below the windows every winter, melting into the floors and rotting through the baseboards each spring.

The veranda collapsed under the weight of one too many ice-laden winters, giving it the appearance of a crooked smile. The hand-carved rails splintered like toothpicks and the porch swing became buried under a pile of haphazard lumber. Undeterred, the swallows moved inside, resolutely building their nests on the top of the window and door frames. They lay their fragile cream and brown-speckled eggs amongst interwoven twigs and strips of post-it notes, nurturing their wide-mouthed squawking young as they flew recklessly between rooms in search of insects.

The rose-patterned wallpaper began to slip from the walls in strips, revealing the paint beneath. Larkspur purple and buttercup yellow and poppy red; layers of generations of lives flaked and fluttered to the floorboards like petals from a dying garden. Old photographs fell as rusty nails loosened and gave way. Faces smiled out from under the debris that littered the ground as the unrelenting elements crept inside, settling into the bones of the house.

Footsteps crunched over the cracked picture frames as local kids dared one another to go within. They dashed past unfamiliar objects lovingly placed high on shelves and unread volumes waiting to be completed on the bookshelf, overturning furniture as they carelessly trampled through. It became a rite of passage to run in through the front door which gaped open on loose

hinges and touch the staircase bannister, screams echoing down the hallway. The varnish on the newel post gradually wore away from the onslaught of adolescent fingertips, leaving a smooth patch of bare wood to mark the intrusion. Childish whispers floated on the twilight breeze amid a sparkle of softly glowing fireflies and wisps of dandelion fluff caught up by the wind. Ghost stories were born in the field behind the house.

What a shame. The hikers and cottagers thought as they moved swiftly past on their way through the woods.

The house shuddered.

The surrounding trees grew taller and clustered around the sides of the house, towering over the now-concealed structure. They blotted out the sunlight, casting the empty rooms into darkness. An ancient maple collapsed during a fierce autumn squall, piercing a hole through the roof. Rain trickled past the eaves and down the walls. The plaster swelled and crumbled, exposing narrow strips of meticulously lain lath underneath. In the warmer months, moss and ferns began to sprout up in the cracks between the boards, willed into existence by the moisture soaking the rotten buckled wood. When it grew cold, dry crumpled leaves skittered across the floor, whirling in the middle of the rooms where the man once twirled the woman along to music pouring out from the radio on the coffee table.

Raccoons lumbered through the sagging door and broken screens, ransacking the kitchen, chasing after the ghostly scent of warm home-cooked meals that lingered on the porcelain dinnerware stacked in the cupboards. They pulled half-empty tins from the cabinets, smashing cups and dishes, and scattering silverware across the tiles. The contents of the spice rack, painstakingly labelled and refilled by the woman, were spilled across the countertops, a mess of cinnamon, nutmeg and all spice. An industrious red squirrel began caching gnawed walnuts and

hard-shelled acorns in the back of the crooked-keyed piano and the nooks and crannies of the range. It chewed up wires in the now outdated appliances, leaving thin tangled strands of copper strewn throughout the rooms, like gleaming bits of Fool's Gold.

A raven, trapped in the upstairs bedroom, frantically launched its fragile body against the remaining shards of glass lodged in the window. It perished there. Its delicate hollow bones lay scattered across the hand-sewn quilt on the top of the bed, bleached by the single ray of sunlight that lazily made its way through the room every afternoon. Inky black feathers floated gently down the stairs, mingling with the torn pages of books violently pulled from the shelves and thrown about the house by partying teenagers. The mice and swallows had long ago abandoned their nests, leaving behind only the dry crushed remnants of egg shells, and the faint odour of urine staining a bedraggled nightgown left behind in the back of the dresser drawer.

The bright coat of vivid blue paint on the exterior of the house faded under the relentless churn of the seasons, burnt by the scorching sun, washed away by the rain, blown off by the gales that raged from every direction. It chipped away, revealing the grey and dreary wood for the first time since it had been newly built all those decades ago. Still, the small section of roof with its murky smashed window continued to peer out from the dense foliage that had overtaken the rest of the structure. Almost imperceptible, it was still visible to those who knew where to search for it as they passed by.

Tear it down! The tourists and cottagers complained, not wanting an eyesore to ruin their idyllic views.

But the house remained.

Haunted.

2024 RCLAS Write On! Contest Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



After writing nonfiction for many years, followed by a novel (*Across a Narrow Strait*, 2018),

Sharon McInnes began writing short stories in 2019. Since then, eight stories have won awards and/or been published. These include *Various Functions of Fire*, which took first place in fiction in the 2020 Victoria Writer's Society Annual Contest, and *The Neighbour*, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Federation of BC Writers BC & Yukon Short Fiction Contest, then won second prize for fiction in the Melody Richardson Memorial Contest. Sharon lives in Cumberland.



alan girling lives in Richmond, British Columbia. His writings have appeared in print, online, on the radio, and in the occasional shop window. He's won a few prizes for poetry and fiction and has had a short play produced. He regularly publishes his poetry at his Substack newsletter called **man of aran**: <https://alangirling.substack.com/>



Chelsea Comeau is a freelance writer, editor, and web designer whose work has appeared in Room, CV2, and SubTerrain magazines, among others. Her chapbook *What You Leave Behind* was published in 2015 by Leaf Press, and earlier this year, Lorna Crozier chose her poem as one of the two winners of Planet Earth Poetry's Tribute to Patrick Lane contest.

Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



Kirk McDougall has been employed as an obituary editor, truck driver, farmer, teacher, programmer, technician, and television dance show host. Growing up on a Saskatchewan farm, he had always thought that an awesome idea for a thrill ride would be to jump off a building, and on his honeymoon, he realized a childhood dream when he stepped off a 233-meter tower in Macau. Kirk creates alternate realities, futuristic macrocosms, and magical quests while sitting on the balcony with his partner, The Poet. When it gets dark, they gaze at the stars. You can find out more about their stories at: <https://2step.com>



Julian Worker is the President of New West Writers. He writes murder/mystery, travel, and fantasy books. He likes cats. Of the books he's written his favourite is Diary of a Buddhist Cat, with the lead character based on his own cat Freddie, who is sadly no longer with us..



Amber Fenik was born and raised in Perth, Ontario where she heard many local ghost stories. She has thwarted death on several occasions and enjoys spending time alone with her cat. Contrary to popular belief, she is not afraid of the dark.



2024 WRITE ON! CONTEST

COMMENTS FROM OUR FICTION JUDGE

CLAIRE LAWRENCE



FICTION WINNERS

Fiction First Place: SHARON MCINNES – *THROUGH THE FOG*

Fiction Second Place: Alan Girling – *The Oldest Lottery*

Fiction Third Place: Chelsea Comeau – *His Hands Made For Fixing Things*

Fiction Honourable Mentions

Kirk McDougall – *Otto*

Julian Worker – *Robert Robot*

Amber Fenik – *The House on Pike Lake*

First Place *Through The Fog* by Sharon McInnes

I'm drawn to characters with relatable internal struggles. In this story, a teacher and a student must confront their hopeless love-lives and let go in order to honour themselves. The story also highlights ineffective and harmful coping mechanisms naturally, which give depth to the characters. Readers will relate to this well-written and engaging story. Excellent work.

Second Place *The Oldest Lottery* by Alan Girling

This clever story is based on Shirley Jackson's original tale about a village lottery where the winner gets stoned to death. In this tale, each time the original story is read, poor Mrs. Hutchinson is forced to relive her death. There is no escaping her fate. Over and over, Mrs. Hutchinson struggles to come to terms with her fate. This is a short, tight, well-constructed story.

Third Place *His Hands Made For Fixing Things* by Chelsea Comeau

In this tale, two brothers must deal with their grandfather's suicide. One brother is emotionally flat and unable to express his grief, nor love for his family. I found the strong dialogue and attention to detail believable and realistic.

Fiction Honourable Mentions:

HM#1

Otto by Kirk McDougall –

“A futuristic fun story that also delves into life and death choices of putting a car on autopilot. I enjoyed the car settings, descriptions and ending.”

HM#2

Robert Robot by Julian Worker –

“A humorous futuristic tale about an impressionable robot; and the human decisions that need to be considered when dealing with sentient beings.”

HM#3

The House on Pike Lake by Amber Fenik

“A story about a deteriorating house full of memories. Lots of vivid descriptions and beautiful word choices. It was haunting.”

“Thank you to RCLAS for hosting the Write On! Contest. Thank you to the writers for the opportunity to read so many varied and talented stories. This year, there were many contenders, and I wish we could reward all of them. For the winners and honourable mentions – Congratulations! You worked hard and excelled at storytelling and craftsmanship. To those who are not mentioned, please review your piece and keep submitting those stories. You are so close. Persist.”

Claire Lawrence





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