

Winter 2025
E-Zine
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Special Feature
Write on! Contest
2025 Winners

R C

L A S



“Wordplay at work.”

2025 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: **CHELSEA COMEAU**)

Poetry First Place: Jessica Lee McMillan – *GILLNET*

Poetry Second Place: Angela Rebrec – *Spring Skiing*

Poetry Third Place: Diana Hayes – *J.J. and Oakley, Gone*

Poetry Honourable Mentions

Anna Eastland – *Grapefruit Spoons*

Diana Hayes – *In the Garden with P.K.*

KJ MacMillan – *In the Blinding Light, Dancing*

NON-FICTION WINNERS (Non-Fiction Judge: **J.G. CHAYKO**)

Non-Fiction First Place:

Cathalynn Labonté-Smith – *HOW TO EAT SUET AND OFFAL AND LOVE IT*

Non-Fiction Second Place: Mark LeBourdais – *Lizard Brain*

Non-Fiction Third Place: Percy Du Hamel – *It Is a Long Trip There*

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

Bryan Cousineau – *The Ring*

Kim Harrison – *The Connie Years*

Emily Deegan – *Juxtaposition*

FICTION WINNERS (Fiction Judge: **SHARON MCINNES**)

Fiction First Place: Edie Reaney Chunn – *ENTRIES*

Fiction Second Place: Joanne E. Betzler – *Gun Control*

Fiction Third Place: Amber Fenik – *Bus Fare*

Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Malleck – *Spring Chore*

Laurel Howe – *Granny's Chair*

Lesley Hebert – *Snapshots of the Past*



13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025 Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions





POETRY WINNERS



Poetry Judge
CHELSEA COMEAU

write on!
contest



Poetry First Place: Jessica Lee McMillan - GILLNET
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Poetry Third Place: Diana Hayes - J.J. and Oakley, Gone

Poetry Honourable Mentions

Anna Eastland - Grapefruit Spoons
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Royal City
Literary Arts
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13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry First Place Winner

Jessica Lee McMillan

GILLNET

nowhere to break away
on the boat, my smoke snuck out
the porthole above the toilet,
rereading his juvie devotions
on legal yellow

a battle of temperatures, the hull
was warm in the muddy Fraser,
ice hold tepid with fish, lunch on red ring
cloud seemed to boil opening week
when we took the biggest catch

lacerated bodies splayed slick
on the deck, bashed to the side
over waves
in the bath, unscrubbable scales
sheathed my legs in a tail
of refraction mesh the same that snags
gill filament to rob breath

fish oiled every inhale,
every paper bill,
overpowering perfume counters at the mall
to score Doc Martens and lipstick,
land sick, I threw up in the garbage

I thought of the way
one salmon looked
when I put her back
in the current too late

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry Second Place Winner

Angela Rebrec

SPRING SKIING

When we drove to Whistler, crocuses
hitch-hiked by the roadside, their purple bodies
shivered as we sped past.

The whole drive you talked:
about endless snow, about how pines endure,
your voice in the background

like a snowstorm. Those crocuses
grew in the shadow of darkened snow
plowed high from winter.

They pushed through with such certainty.
I wanted you to stop so I could ask them,
How long until the thaw? But you left

spring behind, wending up the Sea to Sky Highway.
You talked about how ice cracks rock, how it slides
down & smothers, about the time

you waited five hours for the highway to re-open.
Sometimes, I think snow flies from your mouth
just to freeze me in mid-feeling.

I pressed my cheek against the window.
The spring run-off hummed blue and translucent,
but those crocuses sang like pizzicato notes.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry Third Place Winner

Diana Hayes

J.J. AND OAKLEY, GONE

Jimmy Jacks was how they knew him on that long stretch of logging road
Past Skutz Falls and into frosty clear-cut that time of year
When wives did double duty in the prayers department
Ice bridges, washed out rubble, demon brakes that broke ears before ground

Jimmy lost his innocence sooner than the geese skid the lake's shallows that spring
A secret love somewhere far from home but the Kennedy girl was handsome
He knew she would be as good with kindling as the stove, she had a passion
For his lean cheeks, deep drawl in his laughter, almost innocent smile

How many years could he tell by the kids' notches on the pantry wall
Working on four, then sleepless again with five, his boy Jackson strongest yet mute
He learned patience one bruiser a year, had to bite his tongue
keep time by the pace between strides and all-night yarns

The lake rose up that morning higher than a bastard behind the barn
He loaded the cab, sure to mark the diesel twice before stepping onto the rockers
Settling in while the rain bombs slapped the windscreen silly
Couldn't see a thing but then he had seen it all before

Just past the Caycuse Bridge the road looked bright and clear
Clouds lifting, the lakeshore shaking up the dawn
He didn't hear the two-step slide of the double-wheels
Didn't see the flood but for the wince of his hound Oakley

The dog never failed a ride or missed a day with Jimmy Jacks
Just as the trailer jackknifed then split apart the bridge standards
Oakley's ears cocked, the cab rolled and the lake astern
Nothing to be done now but dive for the bodies, lay them down in arms.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry Honourable Mention

Anna Eastland

GRAPEFRUIT SPOONS

I enter your apartment
about six weeks after you died
to gather your important papers.
I don't want to touch anything else
or unsettle your calmly organized cupboards
covered with labels in your sweet hand:
"Tea," "Spices," "Cups," "Bowls."

My darling scatterbrained Dad
you worked so hard this past year,
this last year of your cancer,
reading Marie Kondo and highlighting half the pages—
to make everything organized for me
because you knew you were dying
even when I wouldn't believe it.

Your home is a little shrine,
a testament to all the things you did last:
where you hung your bathrobe, your plaid shirt,
the dirty baseball cap that you'd wear
doing carpentry in my garage.

I bury my face briefly in wool sweaters that smell like you,
but don't want to take anything home,
except the grapefruit spoons with jagged edges.

Remember your last week before entering hospice?
How I used their tiny teeth to scoop out the half-kiwi
which you allowed me to feed you slowly,
its humble viridescence cupped in my hand,
and that bright sliver of sun-soaked mango—

the baby-bird diet I desperately hoped
would sustain you, but your frail body was exhausted
and your soul was ready to surrender.

These little grapefruit spoons
I tuck in my purse
and flee your empty apartment.

I wish you'd come back and let me feed you again.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry Honourable Mention

Diana Hayes

IN THE GARDEN WITH P.K.

*Light of the swan-white moon.
The blazing light of trees.
And the rarely glimpsed bright face
behind the apparency of things.*

P.K. Page, "The Filled Pen" from *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*

All afternoon we reclined on braided lounges of rattan
Your interior garden draped in bougainvillea's magenta
Hibiscus and zinnia hugging the raku pots at our feet.
Green upon green beyond our gaze, plantain lily long-lived
I had not visited such terraced worlds of colour, except in dreams.
You made iced tea and biscuits, the air unusually close for June
Through kaleidoscopic hues we saw beyond and further
Where hostas bloom their waxy whites in evening sky
Past the timeless gate, then vanish all too soon, under the
Light of the swan-white moon.

We spoke of matters of the heart, wounds without words
The deeper layers barely visible in the fleet days of youth,
Twenty-one that year and my library spare, you shared Loren Eiseley's
Night Country, writing of mammoth bones
Pond life teeming in the salt flats of Loren's mid-west
Where magic is always found in water, even alongside the quays.
You brought me to Rumi's *Guest House* and the *Conference of the Birds*,
Gifts that followed into night, *startling infinities of darkness and light*
My long journey home, free of the questions' unease, shining under
The blazing light of trees.

Was it Brazil where you first flew toward that secret sky? *La ciel*
Or the puzzle mazes, labyrinths, or hedgerows you walked as a child?
Maybe it was orchids in the kapok tree, drums from the favelas

That drove you deeper into green, transmuting colour, where
Insects and suns, caves and water, danced from your filled pen.
For the longest time I was soothed in stillness, your garden's grace
We sat with memory's palette, mine now sharp as decades past
Olfactory, tactile, infinite shades of parakeet, chartreuse, and sage,
Waiting now for *that shake that heralds a new world*, only a trace
And the rarely glimpsed bright face.

Eiseley still on my shelves, Coleman's Rumi on the nightstand, your voice
Distilling the rhythms as you write: *never forget the beauty.*
The last time you read from *The Glass Air*, island's winter festival
Wearing turquoise and silver hoops, your cataracts now gone
Miraculously you declared, as if for the first time seeing the secret depths
Of indigo, aromatic porphyrins at the heart, a garden's wellspring
Here and there, now and then, flowing by osmosis back to Brazil
Where the earth shook and you took up pen and ink,
Revealing all that's hidden, *World within World*, translucent wings
behind the apparency of things.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Poetry Honourable Mention

KJ MacMillan

IN THE BLINDING LIGHT, DANCING

My brother was given a magnifying glass at an age
where I learned boys want to destroy.

He started as innocent as any curious mind would.

Peeling the fragile paper off crayons and laying them in a line, the intensified light
would pierce the cylinder making the pigment bloom in the heated wax.

Mixing colours and peeling them off the pavement. This is
around the age we started to understand.

Started to feel the peeling away and the removal.

The ants were just on a walk when they were blinded
by the white light beside my brother's shoe as he crouched down.

We watched them squirm.
Why did she always want to watch?

You could tell it hurt them by the way
their bodies danced, like a pleading for it to stop.

When they would lock me in my room, quietly waiting –
I would listen, still and mannered, to my brother's
voice; a hoarse, urgent yowl.

Children are innocent by nature, it's being burnt alive
that makes them turn.

He stopped burning them alive
after we watched their pain and felt our own.

I wondered why they enjoyed watching the pain, when this young boy,
he learned to dislike the violence.

Maybe they were just repeating, stuck
in the blinding light, dancing.

Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions



Jessica Lee McMillan (she/her) is a poet and teacher.

She is a graduate of The Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University and she has an English MA.

Recent/forthcoming poems can be read in *CV2*, *The Malahat Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *QWERTY*, and *Canadian Literature*. Jessica lives on the land of the Halkomelem-speaking Peoples (New Westminster, BC) with her little family and large dog. jessicaleemcmillan.com



Angela Rebrec lives and works on the unceded, ancestral lands of the Kwantlen, Tsawwassen, Musqueam, and Stó:lō peoples. A multidisciplinary artist, her writing has appeared in *EVENT*, *Vallum*, *The Antigoniish Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and anthologies across North America. She is the editor of *Composed: An Anthology of Poetry* (Three Ocean Press, 2024). Angela is passionate about fostering community in the literary arts. She is the founding and current president of the Delta Literary Arts Society, where she continues to inspire and support writers of all levels.



Diana Hayes was born in Toronto and has lived on the east and west coasts of Canada. She has published seven books of poetry, most recently *Sapphire and the Hollow Bone* (Ekstasis Editions) *Gold in the Shadow* (Rainbow Publishers), and *Labyrinth of Green* (Plumleaf Press). She launched *Raven Chapbooks* in 2020 and publishes small edition poetry chapbooks featuring B.C. poets. Her debut novella will be released in 2025 by Wipf and Stock. She has lived on Salt Spring Island—the traditional and unceded territory of the Hul'q'umi'num' and SENĆOŦEN speaking peoples—since 1981. Visit her website at dianahayes.ca

Poetry Winners & Honourable Mentions



Anna Eastland is the author of *unexpected blossoming: a journey of grief and hope*. Her poetry and prose are found in various print anthologies, in online journals such as *Vessels of Light* and *The Amethyst Review*, and on *The Habit Podcast*. As VP of the Delta Literary Arts Society, Anna is passionate about fostering creativity in the community and helping people find their voices. She hosts Words on Fire, an open mic for writers, every last Thursday of the month at the Discovery Centre in Delta.



KJ MacMillan (She/They) is a Red River Métis and Ukrainian Settler emerging writer who is exploring themes of estrangement, alienation, and reconnection, and reflects on the beauty of hardship and finding one's strength.



Royal City
Literary Arts
Society



write on! contest

Poetry Judge
Chelsea Comeau



2025 WRITE ON! CONTEST COMMENTS FROM OUR POETRY JUDGE CHELSEA COMEAU



POETRY WINNERS

Poetry First Place: Jessica Lee McMillan – *GILLNET*

Poetry Second Place: Angela Rebrec – *Spring Skiing*

Poetry Third Place: Diana Hayes – *J.J. and Oakley, Gone*

Poetry Honourable Mentions

Anna Eastland – *Grapefruit Spoons*

Diana Hayes – *In the Garden with P.K.*

KJ MacMillan – *In the Blinding Light, Dancing*

First Place *Gillnet* by Jessica Lee McMillan

The sensory experiences within *Gillnet* are raw and genuine, and nearly every word in the poem feels meticulously chosen so as to place the reader directly in the moment the speaker is describing. The assonance and consonance offer a rich depth to the piece that drives the poem's rhythm—lines like "ice hold tepid with fish" and "lacerated bodies splayed slick" are particularly satisfying. All of these skilled techniques culminate in a succinctly stated ending that leaves the reader with an especially striking image that says so much in so few, carefully selected words.

Second Place *Spring Skiing* by Angela Rebrec

A cold and biting metaphor is skillfully woven throughout *Spring Skiing* with such an impressive subtlety. From lines like "purple bodies shivered" to "the spring run-off hummed blue and translucent," the poem is loaded with dazzling imagery, expertly executed line breaks, and the weight of all that is left unsaid.

Third Place *J.J. and Oakley, Gone* by Diana Hayes

The voice in *J.J. and Oakley, Gone*, which is both strong and unique, remains unflinching from beginning to end. The poem paints a vivid picture of a character the reader can't help

but be drawn in by. The poet also achieves a spectacular rhythm and has crafted stanzas both packed with detail and word choices that truly shine.

Poetry Honourable Mentions (In No Particular Order):

Grapefruit Spoons by Anna Eastland –

Grapefruit Spoons is a tender account of grief woven with heartbreaking and deeply personal details that bring the reader in close.

In the Garden with P.K. by Diana Hayes –

In the Garden with P.K. is rich in detail and imagery and provides a truly stellar example of poetic form.

In the Blinding Light, Dancing by KJ MacMillan –

In the Blinding Light, Dancing presents readers with a haunting metaphor that lingers long after the poem's final line.

- Chelsea Comeau

poetry in the park

July 9 Wednesday 6:30pm
Queen's Park Bandshell, New Westminster

Featuring Susan McCaslin
and
Write on! Contest Poetry Winners
with Judge Chelsea Comeau



Host SheLa Nefertiti Morrison



Jessica Lee McMillan



Angela Rebrec



Susan McCaslin



Anna Eastland



KJ MacMillan

POETRY IN THE PARK WRITE ON! CONTEST NIGHT, July 9 2025

With Chelsea Comeau, Jessica Lee McMillan,
Anna Eastland, KJ MacMillan, Janet Kvammen

VIDEO <https://youtu.be/-o6fpO0ZotQ?si=Z9XnSbthRfISK-Km>

Diana Hayes

VIDEO <https://youtu.be/eqHGQpiYtVM?si=Gdt5pFE4sLcb2ycq>





13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025 Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions





NON-FICTION WINNERS



Non-Fiction Judge
J.G. CHAYKO

write on!
contest



Non-Fiction First Place:

Cathalynn Labonté-Smith - HOW TO EAT SUET AND OFFAL AND LOVE IT

Non-Fiction Second Place: Mark LeBourdais - Lizard Brain

Non-Fiction Third Place: Percy Du Hamel - It Is a Long Trip There

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

Bryan Cousineau - The Ring

Harrison Kim - The Connie Years

Emily Deegan - Juxtaposition

Royal City
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13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
First Place Winner
Non-Fiction

HOW TO EAT SUET AND OFFAL AND LOVE IT
© Cathalynn Labonté-Smith

My hostess set down a fiery pudding on the mid-Century, teak table festooned with fragrant evergreens and spiky holly dotted with evenly distributed ruby berries from her back garden, so decorous and camera-ready that it would make Martha Stewart orgasm. The flame defiantly sputtered out. The lights were still turned off for the arrival of the lit sweet, so F. fumbled over the platter to pour more spirits over it and reignite it with a match. Blue wisps of flames that died out due to whorls of freezing drafts in the century-old home converging upon its dome once again licked the edges and crown of the exotic cake.

The conglomeration of dried fruit bound together with suet looked like what we fed starving birds on the prairie in the winter. I'd have preferred a slice of grasshopper pie I spied in the fridge, although it wasn't made of insects rather it was named for its chartreuse colour courtesy dye. F. poured spirits on a silver spoon that she hovered over the mound and set it alight until it blackened. I felt a surge of welcome heat but it soon fizzled out.

A round of applause broke out around the table from my boyfriend, his siblings and father in appreciation of the figgy pud carefully aged for months only to be incinerated before being spooned into waiting pottery bowls then slathered in rum butter. I took a tentative bite into my teensy portion liberally spread with rum butter into a foil-wrapped unidentified object. I plucked it out and examined it.

“You got a coin,” S., informed me. And a chipped tooth. I unwrapped the package to find a pence. What would this tiny coin buy if I went to London?

There were cries of glee around the table as other coins were excavated from the sacrificial dessert. I offered my portion to S. including the coin in case he returned to his birthplace on the ship he arrived in at the port of Montreal. He ate the gift fit for nuthatches, flickers, and other insectivores gratefully. The family morphed before my eyes into a flock of birds pecking away at the winter fare and shiny coins to bring back to their nests to hoard—must have been the rum.

How did they had room for that fatty fuel after a meal of salad drenched in salad cream from a bottle, turkey with sides of ham, bangers, stuffing, bread sauce, potatoes roasted in liquid fat, and brussels sprouts with bacon? Even though my grandmother was British and raised me on tea whitened with powdered skim milk, and jam and cream-filled cookies, and offal dishes that she served to her family of seven children concocted from beef tongue, heart, brain and calf liver, there were a multitude of unfamiliar British eats my boyfriend’s family had yet to reveal.

Bread sauce served on the side tastes like stuffing if it were a beige, cream sauce—an onion studded with cloves bobs in a steamy bath of milk on the stovetop until it is soft enough to collapse. Breadcrumbs, seasonings and spices are added. It makes the carb count click over like an odometer on the Trans-Canada Highway.

The willowy, athletic family didn’t have to worry about high carb, high fat diets. However, after a holiday of English goodies loaded with lardons my clothes tightened and my round face developed a second chin, whereas S. maintained his greyhound-like sleekness.

After dinner, we retired to the living-room for tea, where I sat next to the wood-burning fireplace sucking down F.'s homemade shortbread. The vintage home is inadequately heated with electric baseboard heaters with occasional reprieve from the fireplace.

"It's snowing," I said seeing flakes falling outside the window. S. and I slipped away for a walk. Coloured lights on trees glowed under thick royal icing.

When we returned I overheard F. say, "She's quite overweight." I knew she meant me. No wonder, as I tucked into her home-baked stollen, mince tarts, and even courageously ate steak and kidney pudding with spongy crust made from the ever-present ingredient in F.'s kitchen—suet made of vile lumps of tallow—fat from around the kidney prized among chandlers, for the past week.

I'd only recently started to eat meat again having been a vegetarian since adolescence, so eating offal was a big leap. Not wanting to offend this important cook, I ate the steaming serving, that had boiled and bubbled on the stovetop all day.

I held my breath so as not to smell the kidney chunks as I consumed them. S. reveled secretly knowing how disgusted I was by his specially requested entrée. I'm no epicurean sissy—having eaten roast, raspy tongue, hairy pork hocks, chewy beef hearts, and wobbly, jellied head cheese. I even ate escargot, clam chowder, cattail stir-fry and other experimental foods as a kid.

Offal-loving aside, I could see why this quaint, oak tree-lined enclave of less than ten thousand people, most of whom were also British immigrants or Brit descendants, would want to cling to their fragile roots and traditions and reject outsiders. With their massive single-family homes on one-acre lots that could house fifty people in our provincial housing crisis. But to be fair some were subdividing their lots to squeeze a coach house on their property for their progeny.

His parents only wanted a more suitable match for their oldest son preferably from Oak Bay, like a tall, thin, no-nonsense girl who rode horses, practice law, or medicine, who would produce strong stock. A girl whose parents they knew from bridge, swing dance class, or Rotary Club.

I had horses, but never mentioned it because I rode so badly. Our equine rescues just one step away from the abattoir delighted in tossing me on the ground. I didn't talk about how I originally wanted to be a doctor, because my science grades were too pathetic to be considered for the profession. Nor did I divulge that I applied to be a psychiatric nurse, until my uncle told me horror stories about getting my eyes gouged out by patients, so I didn't show up for the interview. Nor did I tell them about I was keen to join the military right up until they slotted me in for the navy to work onboard a submarine to stare at blips on a screen all day, because a recent study said women were super good at doing that.

I had fallen for S. and it was too late for me to run, although after ten days under his family's microscope I fought the urge to sprint away knowing there was nothing I could ever do to win them over. But I would be the best girlfriend I could be to S. and hope they would forgive me for not leaving him.

I was giddy getting back on the ferry for home. Albeit home was an unfinished basement in a run-down house with one bathroom that we shared with seven other students and two giant dogs who were bathed in the same fur-ringed tub we all used.

I went back to a diet of salads and tofu much to S.'s dismay.

"Tofu makes me impotent," he declared, so it was back to bacon on the weekends.

Forty years later my in-laws, still live in Little England; however, I haven't been back for the past twelve years. Theirs is a "dog-free" home, so my chihuahuas and I are exiled from their wall-to-wall carpeted home, staying instead in dog-friendly hotels. It's a pity as my five-pounder carnivores would eat my portion of steak and kidney pudding with gusto, but the Christmas pudding not so much.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Second Place Winner
Non-Fiction

LIZARD BRAIN
© Mark LeBourdais

One night in late June, my girlfriend Angela got off the phone with an excited look in her eyes. Her teacher friend Naomi's graduating science class had a pet iguana that needed a new home. Angela was keen to volunteer, but I wasn't exactly thrilled by the prospect of bringing a cold-blooded reptile into our apartment. In fact, I'd been pestering Angela for months about adopting a puppy, but she kept deflecting my advances by saying things like, "we're not ready yet for that level of commitment." But apparently we were ready now for at least a reptilian level of commitment. So, in the spirit of friends helping friends, I reluctantly agreed to adopt Naomi's iguana, whose full name was "Sir Ignatius Iggleton the Ignominious" -- or Iggy for short.

Two days later, I came home to find Angela sitting on the couch, gazing at a glass terrarium on the table by the TV. Inside was a layer of mulch, a large piece of driftwood, and two dishes for food and water. On top of the wire-mesh roof of the terrarium was a greenish-brown two-foot long iguana basking under a heat lamp.

"What the hell, Angela?" I said. "What's he doing outside of his cage?"

“Sunning himself, obviously,” said Angela, grinning up at me. “Naomi says that Iggy prefers to bask on top of his cage, so he can be closer to the heat lamp. Apparently one of her students forgot to close the hatch one day, and he just climbed out on top. So after that they left his hatch open all the time. Except at night, of course.”

I sat down beside her. “Look, this wasn’t part of the deal. I really don’t like him being out of his cage like this. It kind of freaks me out. I mean, what if he starts crawling around the apartment?”

“He’s cold-blooded, Ben,” said Angela. “I seriously doubt he’s ever going to want to leave his toasty warm spot there.”

“Exactly my point!” I replied. “He’s *cold-blooded*. Hmmm, let’s see, now where else do we usually hear that phrase? Oh yeah, in news reports about murders committed by cold-blooded killers!” Angela laughed, but I was not to be deterred. “Laugh all you want, but what if he decides to kill us in our sleep because the heat lamp’s not hot enough, or because the grapes we feed him aren’t up to his usual standards?”

She laughed again and said, “Oh come on, honey, you’re being ridiculous. We’ll put him back in his cage at night, okay? Let’s at least give the poor guy a cha—”

Angela froze as Iggy suddenly slid off the edge of the terrarium and dropped onto the floor. We both sat gaping at him as he crawled slowly towards us, his tongue flicking out in all directions.

“Wow, cool,” said Angela. My response was a little different. The icy chill of a deep, primal fear flooded through my entire body. I felt like one of those kids hiding in the kitchen in *Jurassic Park*, and the velociraptor had just figured out how to open the door.

As Iggy crept closer to my foot, I leapt up faster than I ever thought possible. “Jesus Christ!” I yelled. “Get him the hell away from me!”

Angela gave me her classic sideways glance with arched eyebrows as she reached down and grabbed Iggy around the middle of his body. He wriggled and squirmed in her hand. His thrashing movements made me jump back a little further as she walked over to the terrarium, but she didn’t seem concerned at all. She dropped him inside and closed the lid. “There. Happy now, Mr. Scaredy Pants?” Her eyes twinkled as she smiled at me.

I flopped down on the couch and managed a laugh. “Happy? I’m certifiably euphoric. And for the record, my pants are *not* scaredy. I just prefer mammals, okay? Cuddly, furry, warm-blooded mammals! Like bunnies, and cats, and dogs! Like Smoochie, your sister’s Labradoodle! And like you! FYI, you’re my favourite mammal. No contest.”

She laughed, sitting down beside me again. “Well, thanks. It’s mutual. I’m not nearly as furry as Smoochie, though, but I do love to cuddle.”

“So do I!” I said. “And why do we love to cuddle? Because we’re *mammals*, that’s why! I’m sorry, but to me, reptiles are alien life forms. They’re interesting to a point, but they make me deeply uneasy. So it might take me a while to get used to this.”

“That’s okay, Mammal-Man,” she said. “Thanks for trying to make it work.” She leaned over to kiss me, then stood up. “And who knows? Maybe in time you and Iggy might even become best buds.” She smiled sweetly at me as she exited the room.

“Yeah, in your dreams, Lizard-Lover,” I muttered. As I clicked on the TV, I noticed that Iggy had climbed up on the driftwood in his terrarium and was looking straight at me. Was I imagining it, or did I see the trace of a mocking grin on his face? “You think *that* was bad, Scaredy-Pants?” I thought I heard him whisper. “You ain’t seen nothing yet, Chicken-Shit. Better sleep with one eye open, Mama’s Boy.” I shook these ludicrous thoughts out of my head and turned up the volume on the TV.

* * * * *

As Angela had predicted, Iggy spent most of his daylight hours on top of his cage, basking under his heat lamp. But occasionally he left his perch, and whenever I saw him scuttling around our apartment I felt my stomach clench as my lizard-brain fear-response kicked in. The verdict was undeniable: Iggy was a spectacularly lousy puppy substitute. Nonetheless, he

and I were managing to get along, mostly by avoiding each other as much as possible. But alas, our state of peaceful coexistence was short-lived.

One evening while Angela was out, I heard Sparky, our neighbour Patricia's Jack Russell terrier, whining and scratching outside our door. I guess Angela hadn't fully latched the door when she left, because it suddenly flew open as Sparky burst into our apartment, barking ferociously. Iggy leaped off his cage and fled the room at lightning speed, hissing loudly with Sparky hot on his heels. "Oh crap!!" I yelled as I raced after them, my heart pounding.

Careening around the corner into the kitchen, I found them in a tense standoff, growling and hissing as they slowly circled each other. Suddenly Sparky lunged in for the kill, and Iggy leaped right over him and dashed straight towards me. Instinctively I whirled around in terror as he skittered in a flash right up the back of my legs and up onto my back, coming to a stop at the base of my neck. "Gaahhh!" I screamed, flailing my arms as Sparky tried to jump up on my back in pursuit. Desperate to escape, Iggy dug his claws into my shoulders and leapt off into the sink, spurting a massive explosion of stinking purply-brown iguana poop onto my head as he sailed over me. I gagged and staggered back, trying to wipe the disgusting mess from my eyes as Patricia rushed into the kitchen holding Sparky's leash and apologizing six ways from Sunday.

* * * * *

A few weeks later, Angela and I were playing on the living room floor with Molly, our abundantly furry and exquisitely cuddly new Bernese puppy, when Angela's phone buzzed. It

was a text from Jeremy, the student who had adopted Iggy from us the day after the “Sparky Incident.” The text contained two photos. The first one showed Jeremy and his roommate smiling on their couch with Iggy lying draped across their shoulders while they all watched TV. In the second photo, Iggy was nestled in their laps, eating grapes from their hands.

I stared in amazement at the photographic evidence of these two students enjoying the company of our former pet. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn that Sir Ignatius Iggleton the Ignominious was actually cuddling with them! And as I peered more closely I was sure I could see the faintest hint of a cold-blooded grin on his scaly little face.

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13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Third Place Winner
Non-Fiction

IT IS A LONG TRIP THERE
© Percy Du Hamel

It is a long trip there. Your legs below the knees ache. You thank your car for the automatic gearbox and cruise control. Your hips are sore and weary, creaking like the wooden fence posts put up by somebody's grandfather when he was younger than you are now. Your hands tighten around the steering wheel and then, for a moment, you let go. You give them a good shake. There's no need to hold on so tight. The roads are flat and straight. Every so often they curve with the earth, the road a definite boundary between what belongs to one and what belongs to another. Either that or it splits your land in twain.

You can't say which road you need to turn off from the highway. It's when the first few threads of the old house start tugging and the last few strands of the city let go. There are no dogs to greet you at the farm house. The tires crunch the gravel driveway and it curves around the old well. The best coffee was made from that water, coffee that you would crave the further you got from it. The slam of the car door is enough of a doorbell here. The man smoking in his recliner can't hear much anymore but his ears are trained to the sounds of an engine, any engine. Nothing much else but the ringing of the landline and the whistle of the kettle will pull him away from the television.

Above every door in the small house is a cross. Jesus watches over every room. You wonder what he has seen here. People say that nothing happens in small towns but it must be enough to keep people around. The seniors centre they built will be a lost cause in twenty, thirty years. Some say that they already had a senior's centre, it was the bar with the wheelchair ramp.

Outside is an older woman sitting in an even older lawn chair. She tells you to sit and listen to the silence for a while. There's nothing like it in the city, and you need to savour it while you can. The day is warm, and without the strong wind that ripples over the fields, the sun would be unbearable. You sit and listen for a while but can't hear the silence. The buzz of the electrical wires and the old satellite dish are too much. Moving to face another direction, you hear the grass being pushed around by the wind, the grasshoppers, and the ringing in your ears that never goes away. Sometimes it blends seamlessly into the background. Sometimes it is too loud to ignore.

The fields were a wash of soft cream as you drove in. They weren't rolling hills but like the feeling of a hand in the wind of a moving car, stuck out the window, your wrist bouncing against moving air. Now the fields are yellow. The sky is getting darker as a storm rolls in the distance. There is a stark divide between the dark grey sky and the fields become more like waving gold. To the people who live here and grow this land, that's exactly it: gold that is made into bread and cereal and crackers.

Maybe the silence you are looking for is the soft brushing of millions of stalks in the wind. Maybe the silence is the clicking of insect wings. Maybe the silence here is the thumping of your own heart as you look across the horizon for the sheltering comfort of mountains that are too far away to be seen.

When the silence becomes too overwhelming, too deafening, you go back inside. It's hard to believe it used to house so many people. It feels full to the brim with just the few of us. Cramped now, bustling before. There is a steeped silence in the house. You can hear the old clock on the wall, the curling tournament turned down low on the television, and a baseball now being thrown back and forth outside. Thuk. Thuk.

The heat inside isn't oppressive but it sticks in your throat like unsaid words. People talk about other people you do not know. You're told you've met them before but no faces are conjured by the names. The words said here feel heavy. They hold so much more meaning than they usually would. You don't get here often so an 'I love you' here needs to hold the weight of a year of 'I love you's. You wonder how many times those words were said, 'I love you'. Sometimes the stories you hear make you wonder how many are owed to the house itself. How many times were words left unsaid because of other people's expectations.

The drive back is long. It's getting dark now and while you watch the road you also watch the ditches for the glint of a wild eye in the headlights. The storm you watched roll by, turning the fields unbearably bright, has passed now. You were unbearably bright, once. But you too rolled by, changing the landscape as you passed. The landscape changed you too. Your hands tighten around the steering wheel. There's no need to hold on so tight

The silence of the hotel room is the exact opposite of the farm. It is the muffled sounds of a loud television in another room. It is the sputters of the air conditioner. It is the occasional wheeled suitcase down a carpeted hall.

The silence that thumps through your heart is the loudest. It asks too many questions. Will this be the last time you visit? Did you take enough time to make that last visit count? Did you say enough 'I love you's' to the house and the earth and the golden fields of wheat that for such a long time of your life were considered home and are now considered a place to visit on vacation?

Did you say enough to the people? Did you listen enough to the silence so that you can remember it later in times when all other sound is so unbearably loud?

If homeless is a person without a home, what is a home without a person?

Years later, when asked to think of a happy place, a safe place, the farm comes to mind. The fields of gold grain sway.

The sun is warm and holds you like a hug.

There are no sounds but the thump of your heart saying, 'home'.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Honourable Mention Non-Fiction

THE RING © Bryan Cousineau

On October 1st, 1940, my uncle marched off to war and into the most famous Canadian photograph of World War Two. His name was Anthony John Welter, Tony or AJ to his friends and family. He had volunteered to join the army, and fight for Canada. He hailed from Kelowna, B.C. where his parents Frank and Barbara and their 12 children ran a small farm. Tony was a fair haired, blue eyed young man, who stood 5'7" tall, and would be described as stocky, or 'solid'. He was 23 years old.

The memorable photograph was taken at the foot of 8th St. in New Westminster, B.C. It showed a long line of Canadian army troops - B.C. Regiment – Duke of Connaught's Own - pouring over the top of the hill from Royal Avenue, a landslide of troops marching three abreast, down and across Columbia Street, headed for the railway station. In the very front of the picture, a young lad of five has broken away from his mother's grasp and is running, left arm stretched forward, reaching out to his father. His dad, a soldier in line had turned, his long right arm reaching back to greet his son. The man was Jack Barnard and his son was Warren. In the photograph, the soldier marching directly behind Jack, rifle in his right hand, gentle wry smile on his face, was Tony Welter. Asked later, Tony barely recalled the incident. But the photo, titled 'Wait For Me, Daddy', was featured in almost every newspaper in Canada, and later made the cover of Time Magazine.

That was the beginning. It took more than five years of soldiering before Tony returned to the family home in Kelowna. There he put the war behind him. In all, he had participated in liberating Italy, France, Holland and Germany and survived the war without incurring physical injury. He rarely talked about his experiences. Certainly nothing was ever mentioned about the ring he was wearing.

Tony had brought home a ring which he wore on the middle finger of his left hand. It was a large ring, a man's ring, an attractive piece of jewellery, something to be worn on formal occasions but big enough to be an asset in a fist fight; solid silver that glistened when polished. The ring looked to originate from East Indian culture, possibly Sikh. The shanks were narrow at the bottom, but flared on the sides until they reached the crown, where they had more than doubled in width. Each shank profiled a large Indian sword, a scimitar, standing out in bas relief. The crown of the ring was flat, topped with a large sculpted turban, also lying flat but giving the ring both size and

depth. It was beautiful in its artistry. Of course it became an object of wonder in the family but, like so much of his time in the war, Tony never discussed it. Finally one day when he had come to the house for dinner, he answered mother's questions about the ring's origin with what became a simple, pat answer. "Some guy gave it to me" he would say, which would end the conversation.

That was the way it was with uncle Tony. If we kids pestered him about stories concerning the war, he would mention the humorous things that happened. Like the time in Italy when we was on KP (kitchen parade), and was assigned the job of peeling potatoes and other vegetables for a dinner for 200 men. Some scrounger had acquired a small, front-loading cement mixer which was mounted on a trailer, and he'd lined the inside of it with sandpaper. When you started it up and threw in 100 pounds of potatoes, the sandpaper peeled them clean in no time. So, Tony reasoned, if it peeled potatoes so well, it must be great for peeling onions too. Well, not exactly. The 100 pounds of onions he threw in quickly turned to onion mush and onion water, ultimately ground down to nothingness. The incident earned him a lot of snickers from the guys.

But of the ring, he gave out not a clue. Until finally, during one Thanksgiving dinner, when mother, having consumed a few glasses of wine, leaned across the table and demanded "Tony, come on now. Tell us about the ring. Where did you get it?" It was the only time I ever saw uncle Tony look angry. He carefully put down his knife and fork, and stared across the table at his sister with a strong, withering look. "Peggy" he intoned slowly and deliberately, in a low strong voice, "some guy gave it to me". Then he just continued staring directly at mother. And mother, unexpectedly, did something she was unused to doing. She shut up. She got up and left the table, making herself busy in the kitchen until dinner was over. And that was that. The subject was forever closed. Nobody again asked about the ring.

So, what follows now is based on history and Tony's service record, coupled with large amounts of speculation on my part.

Army records are rarely complete, and often inaccurate, as evidenced by the fact that while Tony appeared in that famous photograph on October 1st, 1940, his Statement of Service (SOS) record in the Canadian Armed Forces shows his 'Date and Place of Enrolment' to be December 19th, 1940, more than 2 ½ months later. By December 19th the regiment had completed boot camp and extended weapons training in B.C., and was on its way to Halifax. In November, 1941 they departed Halifax, shipping out to England where they continued training for their next assignment; the invasion of Italy.

The Italian invasion in 1943 was unique in many ways, including being the first time in the war that soldiers from India, including the 43rd Gurka Infantry Brigade, fought alongside Canadian and British soldiers. On Tony's SOS, one of his many jobs mentioned was that of truck driver. He often drove long distances to and from several Italian ports, bringing supplies up to the front. Thus he could easily have found himself exposed to unexpected combat.

War is a constant frenzy of movement; sometimes chaos was the order of the day. Battle lines moved, patrols collided unexpectedly with the enemy, often there was artillery fire overhead, and confusion could outpace planning. Considering the passion that Tony exhibited for the ring, I believe he acquired it in just such a combat situation.

I envision a squad of German soldiers encountering a Canadian position, and a call for reinforcements being answered by the Gurka brigade. In the firefight that followed, possibly a baptism of fire for both the Canadian and Indian troops, Tony could have ended up fighting alongside those same, brave Gurkas. I have an image of a Gurka soldier getting wounded, the details not something to contemplate. I can also see Tony, strong and quick as he was, rushing to the Indian soldier's aid. Maybe he covered for him with rifle fire, forcing the Germans away from their position. Maybe he managed to physically pick up the man and drag or carry him away from the fight. If his truck was nearby, he would have used it to carry him and other wounded soldiers back to a field hospital. As I said, this is pure speculation. No mention of such a fight appears anywhere in Tony's SOS, possibly a clerical failing which also happened far too often. But something significant happened on that battle field. This is how I think Tony interacted with that Indian soldier. It was not a casual connection; no, the force in Tony's voice said otherwise. There was nothing at all casual about the event. It was a meaningful, memorable moment, affecting and changing both their lives. Perhaps the Gurka was severely wounded, so much that he knew his time had come. I can see him slipping the ring off his own hand and gently placing it in Tony's palm, weakly smiling and saying a final thank you.

When he returned home, Tony brought with him The 1939-45 Star, The Italy, France, and Germany Stars, The Canada Defence Medal, The Canadian Volunteer Service Medal With Clasp, and The War Medal 1939-45. He gave them all to grandma Welter and never mentioned them again. The ring was the only meaningful item from the war he retained.

On May 12, 1976, Tony was playing golf with his regular foursome in Pitt Meadows. According to one of his friends, he sank a long putt on the 18th green, bent down to retrieve the ball, and just kept falling. The doctor later said he was dead before he hit the grass; heart attack, the family medical scourge. When he was later buried in the Gardens of Gethsemane in south Surrey, the ring was still on his finger. It was his final request. I guess he wanted to have it with him when he went to meet some guy.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Honourable Mention Non-Fiction

THE CONNIE YEARS © Harrison Kim

I lay for hours atop the cliff above Connie's house, my body flat against the long rock warming in the spring sun, my eyes observing the valley, its trees all green above the curves of the river. In watching and longing for Connie, I felt all the sadness in the world. Sadness fluttering over the spring fields, from my brown eyes to her green ones, connected by soul and spirit and sex, the trinity in my head wanting to fly out to her, to that faded brown house where she lived, in the middle of the pond-scattered fields of April. I watched the ducks whirling up from those ponds, the cars moving down the straight road to the right-angle turn, where the school bus came to pick her up each morning. I stepped on that bus, on weekdays further down the road, sat across from her and did not say a word, though boys grinned and chewed gum in my ear, and girls giggled and teased.

Connie's head turned to the bus window, moved her ponytail across the side of her neck so she could look out better. No other reason to exist on any ride, or anywhere, except to be near her as she pressed her cheek to the glass.

In class, she became the presence behind me, when I turned, one row back, the brunette hair, the heart-shaped face, the turned-down mouth, eyes never wavering, and I was too much of a coward to even speak to her. At the dance, the band played "Don't Let Me Down."

Connie sat across the gym as the blue floodlights shone, her ankles crossed, we looked towards each other through the first verse and chorus, until Jorge Lewis asked her to dance, and she stood up, shook back her hair, and went to him.

I couldn't blame the girl. The stronger pull for me was my shy and inward turning heart that beat between us. All through high school we said "Hi" perhaps once or twice, but we never spoke more. She leaned against the wall eating a chocolate bar in the late afternoon as we waited for the bus home, her face framed in the window, eyes turned towards the parking lot and the bowling alley and the pine trees dotting all up the hill. I watched from back by the trophy case, and did not speak.

At the Easter fair she shepherded her younger sisters and brothers through the booths on Main Street "they're a strange family," my mother said, and I asked why. "Some kind of religious mix-up," she told me.

Connie took good care of those kids. I noticed this caring, besides her sadness and beauty, one of the few times at age thirteen that I was able to pull out of my own head. At sixteen, she smoked cigarettes under the willow trees with older guys on their lunch break. I passed by closely once, and she held that cigarette high and smiled. A flirty challenge.

I came back to town the year after high school and Gary Senger said "Wanna go up and see Chuck?"

"Who's Chuck?" and he said, "That's what they call Connie now."

She'd left home, lived in an apartment downtown with Marjorie Vanderhoek. When we arrived, Marjorie greeted us in her nightgown.

"Everyone knows Connie," she said. "Though she's not here now."

"She would be with everyone else then," I said, and Marjorie laughed.

"I didn't know you had a sense of humour," she said.

"I thought Connie was supposed to be religious," I told Gary, as we left Marjorie waiting on the stairway.

“Sex is her religion,” he said. “Too bad she wasn’t here; we could have had a good time.”

He had such a huge jaw as he turned his head and grinned, and Marjorie behind him waving her slim hand.

Connie had the best legs, no doubt about it. The boys stood across from the girls in Grade 10 Phys-Ed and I stood right across from Connie. She pulled her socks up high. I tucked my shirt in. The bleachers rose behind the top of her head. I should have yelled when I passed her in the hall “Let’s get together now!” but my voice locked within my own inner sphere.

I glimpsed into her eyes when she walked by, she looked into mine. I carried that feeling away in the opposite direction. I called her up once. My voice and hands shook.

Perfectly normal, I told myself, perfectly normal.

I asked her “Would you like to go to the movie tomorrow?”

A long silence.

“I would but I have to babysit.”

A longer silence.

“Okay, it was worth a try. Bye.”

Later, Jorge Lewis came up to me in the high school hallways.

“I hear you asked Connie out.”

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter. But why did you do that? You know she’d never say yes to you.”

It was a relief to hear Jorge tell me directly that I didn’t have a chance. Now I didn’t need to talk with her at all, my anxiety and cowardice justified.

The last time I saw her was in Preston’s Music shop. I worked in the plywood mill then, two years out of high school. I tried out a guitar and a beautiful girl stepped around the side of the

window and stood in front of me. I took a moment to absorb. The girl stayed, looking, listening as I played, her mouth turned down, her eyes direct and clear and true. Yes, it was Connie all right. I looked at her just like she listened to me, our gazes did not waver, and I played. This was some kind of last chance. What would I do? I didn't think, I kept my fingers moving and picked out something I'd never heard before. I don't know where it came from. Out of the heart, out of the blue, from memories of April. Some kind of simple minor guitar combination. I watched her face as I played. Green eyes, sad eyes. I played to her from out of all the past years we'd connected without a word. A longing, a wish, for a place without fear, a place better than reality could ever be. As I continued to pick and strum, a man came round to where she stood by the window and squeezed her arm.

"Let's go, honey."

She turned in an instant, and I remembered my friend Keith saying in Grade 9 "Connie has tiny boobs but a nice ass."

"Yeah, you're right," I replied at the time.

Really though, I hadn't noticed. It was her face, her eyes that drew me in.

Connie stepped out of the store with the man's hand on her back and I watched and played as she left.

I could not talk to her, through all those teenage years. I had no daydream discipline, no anxiety restraint, falling back to the security of aloneness time after time. I lay waiting for her atop the hill in April or stood by the trophy case as she looked out the high school window and waited for me to say something.

Grade 7: She sent me a Valentine card. Grade 9: How did she become so beautiful? Grade 10:

The curves, the face, the eyes green and yearning. Grade 11: My school marks plummeted, for I

lived in a fantasy world where reality did not matter. For me, she was the singular cause of failure. We could have gone out, talked, flirted, kissed and loved.....she'd become pregnant, and we'd marry. I'd work on the railroad or in the mine or the sawmill. Good pay, then a big mortgage. Weekends, we'd roar around the roads in our Ford Mustang and across the lake in our motorboat. Something like that. On and on happy forever ever after.

Instead, I played to her in the music store. After she walked out, I never saw her again, though the arc and weight of that moment has lasted my whole life.

When I lay along the top of the hill that day in April, I never thought I'd be such a coward, and that this overwhelming shyness would free me from the reality of connection, binding me instead to melancholy daydreams.

"This is way out of my league," I told Lesley, my first real green-eyed lover years later, who invited me over to study Shakespeare. I tossed my books down on a pink and red blanket covered couch.

"Get comfy, read Sonnett 129," she laughed, stepping away to her bedroom, emerging in short order wearing a see-through nightie.

"Your imagination is not playing tricks on you," she smiled, as she knelt beside me.

But it was. This was the first time I'd experienced anything like this. For at least the first five minutes, I dreamed she was Connie, and that we were very, very happy. Then I returned to Lesley and dreamed no more.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Honourable Mention Non-Fiction

JUXTAPOSITION © Emily Deegan

I am six months pregnant. Swollen with life and excitement. Wonder for all the possibilities that lie ahead colour my interactions. Strangers are drawn to my growing belly. Everyone appreciates this encapsulated miracle, placing hands on me, my baby. Attempts of reconnection to their own creation journey, feeling the pulse of fresh beginning. On a spiritual level I understand this attention, on a personal level it unnerves me and tests my shy, wallflower self. I am forced into conversations and personal facts about myself, my baby, my partner, slip out before I even realize. Initially, this feels very uncomfortable but as I get taken higher into mom-brain atmosphere, I float out of my former identity and I begin to find these conversations pleasant. I welcome strangers' hands on my belly and engage in their superstitious pregnancy comments. I discuss this in counselling and realize my in-utero baby is already transforming me. The physical transformation so obvious from the beginning, but recognizing this baby is already making me a different person in the world is curious. This amuses and terrifies me. My counsellor assures me this is a good thing. I am not so sure. The unknown I always regard with apprehension.

I am also a nurse. I am still working. It is challenging. My body is heavy, my brain is slow and forgetful. The heartburn is severe, especially on night shifts. Despite the antacids, I chew Tums all day and hold my breath every time I bend over. As much I always try to practice with empathy, I am hyper aware that every patient is also a child, or has been a child to someone at some point. Another gift from my baby. This makes me reflect more on my practice, the situation of my patients, it leads to a lot more questioning.

Part of these questions are about the safety of my baby. Having gone from never hesitating about anything in the workplace before, the hospital has become a constant threat. Pregnancy makes you vulnerable, immunocompromised, you become a visibly marginalized part of the population and everyone continually questions your abilities. I do not like feeling vulnerable. I do not like thinking I am more susceptible to illnesses, and what that means for my developing baby. I do not like my abilities being questioned. But I accept all of this. Because I am pregnant. Because this is temporary. Because generally pregnancy is celebrated by society which means people offer help and accommodation willingly.

Today is a work day. I swallow a little bit of morning sickness on the overcrowded transit system as I commute to work. Public transit is the only space where my pregnancy goes unnoticed. Everyone silently fighting for seats on the early morning trains quickly avert their eyes from my protruding belly. Avoiding acknowledgement of the pregnant lady seems to allow one to keep their seat guilt free. Despite feeling dizzy and nauseous, I do not ask anyone to give up their seat.

The assignment I come onto involves a patient with extensive wounds. Wounds are common on this unit. I enjoy wound care. It is tedious, extensive work that is exhausting and taxing for the patients, but typically they recover well and it feels very meaningful. I read this patient's history and prepare for their care. As I grab the required supplies, I ruminate over the

tragic story that led to this person's injury. A marginalized individual, an immunocompromised individual. This is not temporary for them. This is their continuous lived experience. How do they feel being vulnerable, constantly having their abilities questioned? Do they accept this? Their circumstance is not celebrated by society, accommodations and help are difficult to access. Similar to my early morning transit rides I visualize downcast and inadvertent eyes of strangers as they search for a seat. Instead of strangers reaching for their body, trying to absorb its energy and possibility, I picture them recoiling, fearful of the visible trauma carried on their body. I pause. How easy it is to take life circumstances for granted.

There are missing pieces in the event that lead to this person's injury, with high suspicion of violence. I try to wrap my brain around how someone could end up in such a position. My role in this story is to provide medical care, treat wounds, promote healing and recovery. Recovery and healthy return to exactly what kind of life is uncertain. I think of what might be the worst part of their life shared with so many people, strangers trying to provide them with care they do not yet understand. Forced to answer difficult questions, repeatedly reliving trauma, as different care providers attempt to put their plans together. So different from the harmless personal facts strangers draw from me in baby small talk.

I have premedicated them to keep the pain at bay, with additional analgesia on hand, anticipating much more will be required. Entering their room, I keep the lights low, I speak calmly, introduce myself and inform them what of what to expect. They are familiar with the process, now a few weeks into their stay. This does not mean it is getting easier. Their response is not welcoming but they consent. I wish I could achieve a better rapport. Given their history I do not blame their mistrust. I am acutely aware of the institutional dynamic my position represents. I want them to see me as human, as having the best intentions. I want desperately to hold their hand, embrace them, cry hard with them about the injustices of the world and shout how unfair it is that this has happened to them. How patriarchal of me, wanting to impose my feelings onto them. I suppress all personal emotions, trap them deep down with all the other challenging cases and work within my professional boundaries.

I begin to take down the existing dressing. It is on their face. Their whole face. More and more of the wound is revealed to me. My body responds in a visceral way it has not done before. This is very intense. It is deep. There is bone. A lot of missing features. A face, so tied to one's identity. Personality, emotions, a life radiates through it. Eyes, the window to the soul. The tilt of a smile, a favoured quirk. The crook of a nose, a defining feature. Where are they? I know a whole person is so much more than of any these things, that truly our physical features do not define us. I feel shallow.

The dressing is completely down now. Fully exposed. I am clinical. I put my hands on them. I feel all the hands that have been placed on my belly. I wish to transfer all that wondrous energy into this struggling tissue. I assess. I see difficult grafts struggling to cling onto scarce flesh. I see a long and challenging recovery. I see multiple complicated surgeries ahead. I inject more analgesic, aware of their agony with every moan and flinch. I act as efficiently and delicately as I can. Working on the reconstruction of their face I cannot help but go into myself.

To what extent will their face heal? Will hands willingly reach out to them? What pieces of identity will transform? I suddenly feel so fortunate. My apprehension towards the unknown seems juvenile. I feel silly for needing counselling during pregnancy and the fact that counselling has not been immediately available for this individual is absolutely ridiculous. I feel in complete juxtaposition.

They were a baby once, the child of a mother. I imagine a mother who loved them, held them close. Stroked their plush, angelically soft baby skin. I imagine them growing as a toddler, playful playground scrapes on supple cheeks quickly healing with childhood magic and mother's kisses. I feel the baby coming to life inside me, a face already formed, identity taking shape. I imagine my baby in my arms, stroking its fresh cheek, gingerly tending to the playground wounds they will one day sustain. I desperately hope the wounds of my baby will always be within my means to tend to. I am painfully aware of the world's cruelty and how I will never be able to protect my baby from its harshness. I wonder did their Mother have these thoughts? Did she whisper into their baby's sweet ear promises of protection, of all the beautiful possibilities the world held for them? I wonder where their mother is now and if they still have a relationship. I feel so conflicted working on a face that may never fully recover while a new face grows effortlessly inside me. Too many things I feel. I cannot even begin to imagine what they feel. I hope my baby never has to feel such things. The guilt associated with this hope is heavy.

The dressing is finished. Face completely wrapped. A womb of restoration. I hope for a miracle. Sometimes healthcare can feel miraculous. Sometimes.

Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



Cathalynn Labonté-Smith loved growing up in southwestern Alberta. She moved to Vancouver, BC, to complete her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia (UBC). After graduation, she worked as a freelance journalist until present. She became a technical writer in wireless communication and other high-tech industries, earning a Certificate in Technical Writing from Simon Fraser University. She returned to UBC to complete a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and taught English, journalism, and other subjects at Vancouver high

schools. She currently lives in Gibsons and North Vancouver, BC. She founded the Sunshine Coast Writers and Editors Society and the Art & Words Festival, as well as the Book Awards for BC Authors contest.

She wrote *Rescue Me: Behind the Scenes of Search and Rescue* (Caitlin Press), that was a BC Bestseller, and is a member of Civil Air Search and Rescue.



Mark LeBourdais is a relative newcomer to the committed practice of the craft of writing.

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



Percy Du Hamel is a local genderqueer writer and performer. They have previously performed as a storyteller for Vancouver Story Slam and Vancouver Pride. Their inspiration usually comes from the strange interactions of daily life. However, this piece about the family farm in southern Alberta comes purely from the heart. There is a sense of pride in something that has lasted for generations but a simultaneous sorrow as it now slowly vanishes.

Non-Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



Bryan Cousineau is one of those rare people: someone who was born and raised in Vancouver. Growing up in the West End on Robson St., Bryan graduated from Vancouver College High School, and also holds two diplomas from BCIT. Following a brief stint in transportation marketing, he moved to his first love, advertising, where he has worked for the past 46 years. Bryan is currently VP Sales for a large Chinese website. Bryan also renewed his love of writing short stories, and is an annual contributor to the RCLAS short story competition.



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>.



Emily Deegan is a mother of two young children and Registered Nurse. Between these two obligations it is challenging to find time for her favourite past-times: reading and writing. The power of story-telling captivated Emily from an early age, she quickly became an avid reader and creative writing became an essential outlet for navigating life. Having recently returned to writing after a long drift away from the literary world, she is honoured to have her piece recognized by the Royal City Literary Arts Society. A passion reignite



Royal City
Literary Arts
Society



write on! contest



Non-Fiction Judge
J.G. Chayko



2025 WRITE ON! CONTEST

COMMENTS FROM OUR NON-FICTION JUDGE

J.G. CHAYKO



NON-FICTION WINNERS

Non-Fiction First Place:

Cathalynn Labonté-Smith – *HOW TO EAT SUET AND OFFAL AND LOVE IT*

Non-Fiction Second Place: Mark LeBourdais – *Lizard Brain*

Non-Fiction Third Place: Percy Du Hamel – *It Is a Long Trip There*

Non-Fiction Honourable Mentions

Bryan Cousineau – *The Ring*

Kim Harrison – *The Connie Years*

Emily Deegan – *Juxtaposition*

First Place *How to Eat Suet and Offal and Love It* by Cathalynn Labonté-Smith

We are invited to dinner with the (future) in-laws. In this banquet of a story, we have a seat at the table for a taste of family traditions. This is a spicy piece loaded with some sweetness and a dash of bitters about riding out family traditions and trying to find your place. It flows smoothly, like a hot rum sauce, from one moment to the next, delicious writing filled with flavour and texture, giving the reader a sensorial night out that swings between the delectable and the dubious.

Second Place *Lizard Brain* by Mark LeBourdais

A witty, heartfelt story about sharing lives and compromise. It's a warm-blooded reptilian story of adaption in the household. In this piece we experience a ripple across the surface of a steady and comfortable life. It's a humorous look at facing the pulsating fear of the unknown and how to adapt to it. An original, vivid, and delightful romp through a moment, when something knocks you off balance and how to reconcile it when it's gone.

Third Place *It Is a Long Trip There* by Percy Du Hamel

Rich and vivid writing that presents like an oil painting. Each sentence is like a brushstroke on the canvas. The narrative weaves in and out of the light, like a satin ribbon catching reflections, imprinting them in the mind. It evokes memories embedded in us of place and time and reminds us how we are guided and shaped within and beyond the shifting landscapes of our past. This is a charming road trip through memory.

Non- Fiction Honourable Mentions:

HM#1

The Ring by Bryan Cousineau

A thought-provoking story about a family mystery and the secrets that we never get to unravel.

HM#2

The Connie Years by Kim Harrison

A tender, heartfelt tribute to first love and the chances we didn't take.

HM#3

Juxtaposition by Emily Deegan

A gentle metaphorical journey through transformation, understanding and healing.

J.G. Chayko





13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025 Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions





FICTION WINNERS



Fiction Judge
SHARON MCINNES

write on!
contest



Fiction First Place: Edie Reaney Chunn - ENTRIES

Fiction Second Place: Joanne E. Betzler - Gun Control

Fiction Third Place: Amber Fenik - Bus Fare

Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Malleck - Spring Chore

Laurel Howe - Granny's Chair

Lesley Hebert - Snapshots of the Past

Royal City
Literary Arts
Society



13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

First Place Winner Fiction

ENTRIES © Edie Reaney Chunn

1.

I'm not old enough to drive and neither are you, but you're closer than me by three years, which makes you seem impossibly interesting and different and knowledgeable. Any time your sister invites me to your house, I take up the offer eagerly, even though I can't be sure you'll be there. The eagerness with which I accept each invitation must be being interpreted favourably, because I'm now invited quite regularly for sleepovers or even just supper, and your sister frequently refers to me as her best friend, which fills me with a warm feeling – though that particular feeling cannot hold a candle to the ones that erupted in me when you laughed at a story I told about a teacher you used to have – or when, before leaving to go to a movie with your friends and the boy you like, you asked me (*me*) if you should wear your hair down or up (and it doesn't even matter that you didn't take my advice to leave it loose and free to fall into your face and tuck behind your ears, because once you had braided it and pinned it carefully into a crown around your head, looking at you felt like looking at a sky too bright to see with eyes wide open).

2.

Although I can't say the same about any of the subsequent occasions, the first time it happened was accidental, a consequence of your sister and I sneaking (overtaken by an illicit, tipsy feeling) into your room to put on the lipstick you were allowed to wear. We watched

ourselves in the mirror on your dresser, your unmade bed reflected behind us, and I saw the top left-hand corner of your half-filled diary peeking out from under the comforter, a few lines of your looping cursive visible but illegible, backwards in the mirror. I didn't let on to your sister that I had seen this, but I couldn't get it out of my head: the pull of the ink, the secret things you were thinking about and writing down. Those were the things I wanted – more than I have ever wanted anything – to know.

Later, when the lipstick got onto your sister's teeth, ugly blooms by her bite line, I didn't have the heart to tell her. I cringed each time she laughed or smiled at anything, embarrassed by her obliviousness, and how it reminded me I must be oblivious too, in ways I would never see.

3.

Now that it's summer vacation, I come over even more frequently and spend entire days at your family's home. I lie on the sticky leather basement couches or play badminton in the backyard with your sister, who is a better player than I am, although I tend to win the other games we play.

I find your hair tie in the couch cushions and wear it until the rubber band snaps. I want to use the glass I see you drinking milk from at the dinner table. When I find out you sleep without a flat sheet on your bed, I insist on doing the same – aggravating my mother, who has a very conventional understanding about the ways in which beds are to be made up, and kept clean, and slept in.

4.

Your sister tells me there are some nights that you sneak out. She had to cover for you once: she's annoyed when she talks about it, but also jealous – I can tell. We speculate about

what kinds of things you do, where you go, whom you speak with. We talk until the sun has almost risen. Both of us hope you might invite us to come one day, even though we know you never will.

It burns me to think about these parts of you that I can never know, but then I remember: your secret, looping cursive; the pull of the ink; cool pages filled with answers to soothe my scalding, acid interest.

5.

Because she still likes the kinds of things kids in primary school like – making bracelets, drawing, puzzles – I find it's easy to leave your sister in the middle of some activity. She doesn't notice when I start to sneak into your room and snatch moments with this hidden, paper version of you.

The first time I do, reading feels like diving into a cool lake in the middle of August: if I want to, I can swim all around that lake's edges and see everything that lives there or had been thrown in with the hope that it would be forgotten. You stop seeming like the sky – instead, you are a piece of the world reflecting it, one I throw myself into.

6.

A feeling gnaws at me each time I read your journal – a concern that I should be ashamed, when I am in fact quietly, deliriously gleeful. The gap between that “should” and how I actually feel is an undertow that pulls in me deeper, gaining strength as it widens.

What's more, there are questions that tear at me the moment I put it down, agonizing and unrelenting. Who is that “you” you keep writing to, and could it be *me*? “You” always

understood; “you” would never guess who had leaned against your locker and asked how late your soccer practice went. *I* would love to understand — *I* would love to guess.

Soon I realize that, while I would love to be your “you”, I could also be your “I”. The steps required to take me there, however, are too big to take quickly. It will be years before I can be anything like you. Still, I study you, and try to learn to do everything exactly as you do: I want to anticipate how you place one thought after another, to know the turns of your handwriting by heart.

Before too long, an idea blooms inside me, slippery and unavoidable as algae scumming the surface of a pond, spreading until it has the strength of a plan.

7.

I let my plan unfurl on a night when I’m sure you’ll sneak out. I wait and wait, watching TV with your sister in the basement, snippy insipid shows, the whole time knowing you are upstairs, waiting for the house to fall silent and asleep.

It takes less time than I expected for you to leave, and you’re so quiet I almost miss it: the click of the kitchen door shutting, your footsteps light and free on the back stairs. Your sister has fallen asleep in front of the TV, blue light blurring her into the couch.

You are gone and I rise through the house, noiseless, a gull on an updraft.

8.

Your room, full of fugitive, melting shadows cast by the bedside lamp you left on, is across from your sister’s, near the end of the hall on the top floor. The pull of the ink: I slip under your comforter and slide open the drawer of your nightstand where it can always be found, stowed away each day after you release your thoughts into its pages before going to sleep. Each

page whispers against my fingers as I flip through to find the only time you mention me. I hold my breath, because every time I come to this place I have to fight off disappointment and disgust at seeing myself as something so fragmented, just part of your summary of an uneventful day; and I am filled with the desperate wish to be anything but your sister's friend – who comes by sometimes – and seems nice if perhaps a little shy –

9.

I still haven't managed to feel bad about what I want to do, and I can tell that knowing I'm doing something wrong won't stop me (and in fact, I wonder if in this moment, knowing I'm doing something wrong is what carries me on).

When I finally feel ready, I turn to your most recent entry (written only hours ago), uncap your pen and, with a hand steady as a cloud passing the sun, bring it to the paper to run the ink over the lines of the entry's date; then over the curling, capital "D" that salutes every entry; then over every line and dash and dot and shape on the page, carefully writing over your words so I can drop myself into them like a stone into a lake, sinking to the bottom, never leaving a trace.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Second Place Winner Fiction

GUN CONTROL © Joanne E. Betzler

Feral grumbles and agitated rustlings pull me into sleep-muddled consciousness. I drag my arm across my swollen belly and fumble the bedside table for my glasses before half-rising to my elbows. A narrow beam of sunlight from the edge of the blind draws my eyes to the open door of our closet where Mitch's protruding, boxer-clad butt sweeps every shard of sleep from my brain.

At least he put on underwear before diving into storage-chaos.

"What are you doing?" A sharp blow to my diaphragm freezes my momentum. I struggle to sit up, certain my pregnancy is the longest on record. *Am I really almost a mom?*

"I'll kill that sucker."

"What?" What does he want to kill this time?

"Are you deaf? That fucking woodpecker is back." The clutter of pressed shirts, dress pants, shoes, and packing boxes muffles his words but not his wrath. "Why is there so much crap in here?"

The hammering overhead isn't loud enough to have wakened me, but now, aware of the second disturbance in two days, I understand Mitch's annoyance at missing both his weekend sleep-ins. But why can't he be this easy to rouse during the week?

“So, I guess Chili and Marmalade didn’t work.” I drag myself from bed and slip into my robe, recalling yesterday’s woodpecker-fiasco. Mitch stuffing our cats through a gap in the siding of our old house, into its dark attic abyss, expecting them to hunt an invisible pest still gnaws at me. How could they possibly have known what he wanted?

“Obviously, not. I’ll show that stupid bird.” Mitch twists his torso and steps backwards.

“What are you looking for?”

Empty hangers clatter as he pulls himself from the tangle and turns, brandishing his antique shotgun.

“This.” His prized treasure from his grandfather. The one he’s carried city to city, province to province for five years. No matter how many arguments I argue or prayers I pray it remains a permanent life-fixture.

I know he knows how to use the weapon. His stories of youthful prairie game-bird hunting feel endless. The frosty thrill, chasing a succulent partridge or pheasant ...

But – it’s a gun. The fuel for my childhood nightmare: Dad’s October elk-hunting expeditions. In my sleepless, juvenile-mind, a core-deep certainty of a misfired weapon and never seeing my father again.

Now, a concealed firearm. Its evil waiting to pique the curiosity of our future children and activate innocent games ...

... in the chamber a forgotten shell...

“No!” My heart wedges in my throat. Baby limbs batter my stomach, my crotch, and deflate my clumsy lurch for Mitch’s free arm. *I really am almost a mother.*

“Yes.” Mitch steps away. “But you’re right. This isn’t a good place for it.”

He props the weapon by the door, opens the bottom drawer of his dresser and rummages beneath his clothes. A grin spreads across his face as he stands to admire two shiny red and brass shotgun shells in his open hand.

“No! You can’t ... It’s the city ... We have neighbours ...” I can’t breathe. “It’s illegal.”

“Fuck the city and fuck the neighbours.” Mitch sets down the ammunition long enough to pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. “I’m not letting a pesky woodpecker move into our attic and ruin my life.”

He slips the cartridges into his pocket and the gun over his shoulder, disappears down the stairs. My pulse sprints faster than I know possible. Is he seriously going to shoot at our house? Into our attic?

I shut the closet door and follow, certain I’ll never catch up.

The empty kitchen feels barren and cold despite the sunbeam beckoning in the middle of the floor. Where are the cats? They could be anywhere. Even back in their new-found attic lair. Images of limp, feline bodies peppered with lead pellets flash through my head.

“Chili. Marmalade. Come kitties – kitty, kitty ...” Seeing Chili trot across the room, her green eyes curious, I take a breath and stoop to pet her glossy tortoise-shell coat. I laugh to see Marmalade poke her pink nose from behind the phone-desk. She lets out a short squeak as if to say “What?”

In slow, steady, awkwardness, I lower myself to the floor and scoop my cats close. A thundering bang rattles the old windows, and we jump in unison. The animals stiffen, their eyes darting in every direction. The firm kick in my diaphragm tells me my baby isn't deaf.

A ringing in my ears muffles the second shot's boom but nothing mutes the piercing sting of cat-claws grappling through my robe, into my flesh, as the cats break free and disappear.

With hot tension consuming my muscles, I stretch out on the cool linoleum and will my body to relax. I press my palms against my hard belly and count my long slow breaths. *What kind of mom will I be?*

"What are you doing on the floor?"

I jolt upright at Mitch's bark from the doorway.

"You scared me." Marmalade creeps close and nuzzles my hand pressed against my racing heart. "Well, did you get it?"

"What do you mean 'get it'? I just wanted to scare it away." His stone-cold glare doesn't surprise me.

"I'm not deaf. The hammering has stopped and you did say you were going to 'kill the sucker'."

"I did not. I'm not a murderer." A fiery hue washes over his face.

"I didn't say you were a murderer." Why does he always twist my words?

"Yes, you did. I am not a murderer."

"I know you're not a murderer." Every relaxed muscle in my body stiffens. I set Marmalade on the floor and struggle to my feet.

"Then stop saying I am. And hurry up and have that damn baby, would you?" Mitch storms past me, up the stairs.

Soothing sounds of water trickling from Mitch's shower create a powerful urge for me to inspect the nursery's readiness one-more-time. Planned or not, this is my time to become a

mother. I trudge up the stairs, wondering how many more days of waiting I have. *I will be the best mom I possibly can.*

The open bedroom door surprises me but cheerful sunbeams bouncing off soft greens and yellows of freshly decorated walls erase the nagging images of babies smothered by heat-seeking felines, and welcome me into the tidy, pristine room. The crib's cozy sheets, embroidered quilt and bumper pads, the half-full dresser, change table, the rocking chair in the corner – all waiting in perfect order – their patience limitless.

I open the bureau's top drawer to caress the delicate folds of baby clothes, lift a tiny t-shirt to sniff its freshness. A subtle movement tight in the crib's corner, the twitch of a tail attached to a dark fuzzy ball named Chili, catches my eye and I freeze.

I take a deep breath and set the garment down.

“Hey kitty-pie. When did you learn to open doors? It feels safe and quiet in here after our wild-west morning, doesn't it? But you know you're not allowed in this room.”

The cat mews as I lift her warm body and give her a hug before setting her in the hallway.

“I'll be right back, babe. Just let me make sure everything's put away.” I shut the door and smooth the miniature clothing before sliding the drawer closed. Sunlight from the open window warms my back but does nothing to soothe the tension in my torso. I need to get moving. Mitch will be out of the shower soon and I haven't even put coffee on.

But something isn't – quite – right.

One last look around ...

... I spy the open closet door. Just a crack – but still open. A door too heavy to be Chili's work. Let me just check ...

A faint, but strange aroma wafts from inside. Acrid. Like the odour of Dad's old radio after a tube burned out. Could the house's ancient wiring be shorting out?

I pull the door wide and scan the orderly storage space filled with baby supplies to be grown into two, four, six, months down the road and my heart stops. In the safety of the back corner, shielded by a freshly folded stack of terrycloth sleepers, sits the dark-eyed barrel of Mitch's shotgun, its sinister laugh mocking me as it stares deep into my soul.

How dare he?

Ferocious muscle spasms seize my shoulders, tear down my back, and crush into my abdomen. I press my palms to the underside of my belly and focus on slow deep breaths to absorb the tension and feel the rhythm of my pulse. Strong – and – steady. Like the woodpecker drumming in our attic. *Oh my God. I am almost a mom –*

But, a gun in the nursery?

I straighten my body tall, and yank the weapon from its hiding place.

“Over my dead body.”

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13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Third Place Winner Fiction

BUS FARE © Amber Fenik

"You got five bucks?"

I shake my head, careful not to make eye contact, shuffling further away into the back of the bus shelter. The corner reeks of piss and there's a discarded condom plastered to the ground. I try not to think about whether it was used as I stare out through the dirty glass.

"It's not for drugs." The man pipes up, breaking the long drawn-out silence. I'm not sure why he cares what a stranger thinks of him; if he interprets my refusal as judgement. He looks like he has led a rough life. His haggard face and unkempt clothing conceal his age. He could be anywhere from his thirties to his sixties.

"I don't use any of that shit." He continues on, unabashed. "It's all full of toxins...except weed – it's natural." Perhaps misreading my apathy as skepticism, he adds with the certainty of a well-educated authority on the subject, "It's good for you."

Not for the first time that morning, I do the math in my head, try to uncover some new way to afford a car. I could buy a junker outright with my savings, but the cost of parking and gas remain out of reach. Not to mention that any impending and unexpected disaster – of which I was discovering there were many in life – would render paying for repairs or new parts impossible.

The Number 5 Rideau pulls up and I hoist my heavy bags of groceries aboard, the plastic handles digging into the palms of my hands, cutting off circulation. It had been raining heavily all day, the bright yellow-orange numbers above the windshield of the bus a blurry glow, but I needed milk. Staring longingly into the empty refrigerator and hoping for a solution that didn't involve leaving my apartment and having to deal with other people on top of inclement weather only lasted so long. I watched as cars pulled into the lane ahead of us, easily manoeuvring though the downpour. I envied how convenient it would be to pull into a parking space at the front of the supermarket, tuck everything into the trunk or slip it into the backseat, and just drive straight home. No stops.

The bell dings, the doors whoosh close and the mammoth vehicle jolts ahead, throwing me off balance. I have to grab the metal bar to keep from falling over, wiping my hand on my jeans as I perch at the edge of a slightly damp seat.

Exasperatingly, the man from the bus shelter sits down across from me.

Looking over both of his shoulders he leans forward conspiratorially, carrying on the conversation as if it never ended, as if I were an active participant in what was quickly becoming a seemingly endless monologue. "It doesn't matter if I did use it on drugs. We're all poisoned anyway." He waves a hand up in the air. "Chem trails. It's already in our blood."

He laughs, then devolves into a coughing fit. A wet hacking from deep within his chest. A glob of phlegm hovers on his lower lip.

I look up, feigning deep interest in the advertisements running along the length of the bus's interior.

BE YOUR BEST SELF! Declares the placard directly in front of me. The lower half of someone's face is visible, the smile too big, the teeth too white. A needle is being injected into the unnervingly smooth, flawless skin.

"You are too, you are too!" He calls over to the woman a few seats behind us.

She diplomatically ignores him, continuing her argument with whoever was on the other end of the call, cell phone gripped tightly against her ear.

I silently pray that my roommates will be out tonight so I can have our cramped apartment to myself. A rare luxury.

"Mercury." The man says, winking at me as he taps the side of his forehead with his index finger. "From the microchips." Eyes flashing with the internal glee of someone who thinks that they know better than everyone else. A hefty splash of narcissism brought on by delusions of grandeur. Whatever undiagnosed personality disorder he was currently meandering around with, he clearly enjoyed having a captive audience for his rambling and barely coherent thoughts.

Admitting defeat, I pull a crumpled five dollar bill out of the recesses of my coat pocket. I hand it over across the aisle, placing it in his filthy hand, fingers wrapped in worn bandages, nails cracked and stained yellow from nicotine. He grabs my wrist, pulling me toward him with startling ease and unexpected strength. Whispers into my face with whiskey-soaked words.

"This isn't real, you know. None of it is. This isn't the way it's meant to be."

His gaze is sober, steady. His eyes dark.

I feel a rise of panic swelling in my throat. I glance over at the bus driver, who has his eyes locked onto the road ahead, and then at the woman seated towards the back, desperately willing her to make eye contact with me. Reality feels intangible, as the notion momentarily takes hold in my brain and everything I had known to be true slips out from under my feet.

Then the bus suddenly veers to the right, and lurches to a halt in front of my stop.

BRONSON AND MAIN. The robotic voice of God calls out from above.

I feel his hold slip from me as new passengers shuffle aboard. A quick flash as he squirrels away the money I had given him moments ago.

"Hey – you got five bucks?"

He had already latched onto one of the new passengers, before I even disembarked.

I stand there for a few minutes in the glass shelter, temporarily at a loss as the bus speeds away, splashing my sneakers with dirty water from the gutter. Unsure of what to do with myself, feeling surprisingly, unsettlingly dejected, I turn away and began to walk home in the rain.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025
Honourable Mention
Fiction

SPRING CHORE
© MJ Malleck

She stood, face to the wind, the hem of her cotton housedress pasted tight against her thighs, her goose-pimpled arms crossed over breasts that had fed half a dozen babes but now ran dry. William, the youngest, was halfway up the ladder they had braced with rocks from the garden. He'd not wanted to go up there, but Charles and Henry had already left for work. "You can stay home from school," she'd said. "I have an important job for you."

At the roofline he turned toward her. *G'wan up*, she mouthed and shooed her hand. This spring squall would tear the words from her mouth, and she didn't need nosy neighbours coming around. This wasn't anybody's business.

The boy seated himself facing her, a dark shape against a sky the exact colour of the faded sheets flapping on the line. He'd laid his tool down and looped his arm around the metal vent pipe. Wispy dark clouds skidded by. The rain wouldn't come till the wind died down, or it would fall in the next town.

She'd waited since the thaw for this weather. Last spring, three men had laid a new roof on the house next door, right after a windstorm like this. When she'd admired it to the neighbour, on her knees in the front flowerbed, she'd learned that insurance had paid for it. "Because the storm knocked out so many shingles."

Billy had unhugged the pipe with the wonder of the view. She remembered as a girl, leaning out the hayloft doorway, seeing miniature tractors on the hills, farms over. He'd be able to see the swings in the park, and the flat red-brick school a few blocks over. If he scooted higher, to the peak, he could swing legs on either side and settle in with a real birds-eye view.

But he was a good boy, with an important job. He looked at her and all around, for what she'd told him he'd find.

In the house, she'd sent him to the basement for the heavy hammer. When she'd begun to explain how to use it, the boy had been insulted. He'd used the tool lots, didn't she know he'd helped Charlie to fix the fence? There was more she wanted to tell. She held his bicep firmly and kept on.

"Some might be already lifting. You wet your finger then and hold it up to see where the wind is at. Then use this here to bend back the shingle – so it will catch the wind. If none are loose, claw a few up. Pull up hard on the side the wind comes from."

She watched his dove grey eyes squint with thought. Two of her children, William, and Victoria, were born with fickle eyes that were sometimes blue like the deep side of the lake, sometimes pale grey like cigarette ash, sometimes a rare olive green. When he was a baby she'd change his tiny sleeper, like a game, just to watch his eyes adjust.

"Billy, listen. If Mr. Simons, or anyone else, comes walking by, I want you to do something for me. Turn the hammer over, and pretend like you're hammering the shingles back in. You understand?"

So far, so good. Mr. Simons, and everyone else, was staying inside.

When the roof next door was fixed, it'd taken the men only half a day. She'd been able to watch from her kitchen window. Two of them had flung their shirts off and stretched their back muscles and smoked as if standing on a beach. The other kept bending to pick up loose nails, let sweat darken his collar and armpits. He might be Italian, or Greek, with those dark curls and hairy forearms.

She'd taken her softest tea towel from the cupboard and carefully wrapped three bottles of ice-cold ginger beer. Timed it just right, when the foreman's red truck had pulled in and then he'd left, and the men were pulling their ladders down. Walked out to the street and casually offered the bundle, along with the metal opener.

"Best I can do, seeing you've got more work today, I guess." Looked down from his gaze on her powdered cheek.

The wind picked up and darker clouds began to mass over the park. Billy was pointing to a spot to his left and giving her a thumbs-up signal. In reply, she put her hand to her mouth, sucked the ringless finger and lifted it in the air, although there was no mistaking this nor'easter.

The boy crept on knees across the rough asphalt, hammer in one hand. The woman remembered what a fast crawler he'd been, even with his favourite bear in one fist. She'd had to patch the knees in his footed sleepers. Yet no one had the heart to rush him, the baby, to walk or to talk proper words or to hold a spoon. He'd been so adorable, scooting faster than she'd ever seen. His sisters called him baby crab, crabby for short.

Billy sucked his finger and lifted it; his face already turned into the blow. Then he squatted and focused on inserting the hammer claw. When it grabbed, the force of his will made his thin arms stiffen, and he whipped back and forth like a puppy with a sock in its teeth.

The woman had turned away, drawn by the sound of a loose garbage can lid crashing across the street. The boy lifted a loose quarter-piece of asphalt onto his lap. He dropped the hammer onto the roof and gripped the edges of the shingle like a sick-bed tray. He rose off his haunches and held it up for her approval. Within seconds the wind tore it away so that just as she turned back toward the back-split her cheek was sliced open, and she was shoved to the grass.

Her mind filled with the terror of curved talons, so she cowered in a tight ball with arms hugging her hair. Now, hailstones beat like massive wings on her bare arms, and she cried out against being lifted into flight.

On the roof, the boy had been twisted so that he fell hard onto his side, the hammer bruising his ribs and the gravelly finish scraping his smooth cheek. Laying there, he saw in a daze the white hailstones bouncing freely, like watching a hundred games of jacks on the schoolyard at recess.

Ice turned to rain, and her mind woke up to Billy. She sat up sharply and back on her heels, lifting her eyes to the downpour and the black roof to find her son. A wet and heavy clod of dirt had somehow come from the lawn onto her face when she sat up. She raised the corner of her apron to swipe it away; her favourite lemon-print apron that was already soiled by flour-coated hands. A knife stab of pain made her drop her hand and jump up. What the...? No knife in her pocket, but red lemons where she'd touched her face, and a sickening sense of whatever was resting heavy on her cheek belonging to her, though it didn't belong there.

She saw Billy was all right, he was sitting up now in the rain, shuffling on his bum back to the iron pipe. She had to get him down, get him inside, get him safe. A gush of warm liquid, not rain, ran down her chin. Now she pressed a bundle of soaking apron hard against her cheekbone and waved with her free hand.

“William, William.... come here right now,” she wailed. Thunder clapped. She tasted metal.

The boy looked down at the movie monster waiting on the ground and held on tight.

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Honourable Mention Fiction

GRANNY'S CHAIR © Laurel Howe

I looked eagerly ahead as we approached Granny's house. She was the only person I knew who even had a house. Hers had a wide veranda with rugs and chairs and pots and plants. Toys, ancient and rich with stories, and one crickety-crackety rocking chair that only she ever sat in.

Oh, she never told me I couldn't. Not once. But that chair was where the magic happened. It's where the toys told their secrets, and photo albums came alive. It's where I dumped my woes and got my hugs. If Granny was rocking in that chair, Granny was mine. Nothing could take her attention away. The most anyone could get from her was a wave and a "later." Even my mom.

If Granny wasn't in the chair, that meant she was doing something. Her attention would be sporadic at best, and I knew to go find something else to do. I always did that something where I could watch the door to the veranda.

But Granny was there that day, a wide smile on her face, the chair rocking slowly. She didn't get up. I used to cry whenever she got out of the chair and so she didn't unless she meant it. My heart lurched. Joy or fear? I didn't know. I had a question that day. An important one.

I crawled into Granny's lap and hugged her tight. Crickety-crackety went the chair. I barely noticed it anymore but when I did, it made my heart burst, and my dimples show. That sound was the cushion of a soft lap and the caress of a gentle hand. It was safety and warmth, even in winter.

My mom said I was getting too big for Granny's chair, but Granny insisted it was the best part of her day. Usually, we chatted for a while. I'd catch her up on Alice, my best friend, or my lessons, or who I was mad at. But on this day, my question weighed, and we just rocked.

Finally, I couldn't wait any longer. I'd risk the magic, just this once, to get my answer.

"Granny," I said and waited.

Something must have leaked into my voice. The rocking paused for a tiny moment. If I hadn't been holding my breath, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

"Yes," she said. The rocking continued. Slower. I think.

I took a breath, suddenly not ready after all. I cleared my throat. I looked out from the veranda to the tall willow tree that hid the road and the world. I watched a bird land on a branch and a leaf crawl across the lawn.

“Why am I safe from Pox?”

Crickety-crackety, crickety-crackety went the chair.

When I’d asked my mother this question, she’d said “because.” I’d asked her a second time, and then a third and each “because” had gotten harsher and meaner. I didn’t dare ask again.

At last, Granny answered. “Your immune system fights it off.”

That answer made no sense to me.

“Mom says Fred can’t get Pox cause he’s already had it. Have I had it too? But I don’t have scars like Fred.”

Granny sighed. I looked up at her. Her brows pointed down to tears, that left a trail to her mouth, to where her lips folded together. I hadn’t seen this Granny before, and I felt awful. I still wanted my answer.

“Once upon a time,” she said, and I was confused. She always started her stories that way so I would know they were stories. This was a serious question. I wanted the truth, not a story. I didn’t interrupt though.

“Once upon a time, we had the ability to send pictures of Pox to the little submarines that roam inside your blood and keep you safe.”

I knew what submarines were, and I knew what blood was too. I picked at a scab on my arm so that the blood flowed. I wanted to see a submarine.

“If the submarines had a picture, they could recognize Pox when she came and kill her before she could hurt us. This was a truly wonderful medicine.”

I couldn’t see any submarines.

“Some people started making up stories. They said the pictures were made of poison and the poison made people sicker than the sicknesses like Pox. It was silly nonsense, but many people believed these stories and refused this wonderful medicine. Even when their children died, they refused it.

“Then one day, a man was put in charge of all the medicine in the land.”

“Like a king?” I asked.

“A king of medicine,” said Granny.

“He said no longer would we send pictures of our enemies to the submarines. Pictures would not make people sick anymore. So, of course, many, many people got sick and some of them died. People begged for the pictures, but he would not change his mind. Soon after he made a new law that forbade people these pictures from anywhere in the world.”

Crickety-crackety, crickety-crackety went the chair.

“Your parents got themselves some Pox pictures and they gave it to your submarines and now Pox won’t make you sick even if you get her.”

Crickety-crackety, crickety-crackety went the chair.

“You must never tell anyone this.”

Crickety-crackety, crickety-crackety went the chair. For the first time ever, the sound intruded, grated. I wanted it to stop. I could feel Granny’s body shake. I knew she was crying but still, I was mad at her.

“I didn’t want a story Granny. I wanted the truth.”

Crickety-crackety went the chair.

“That *was* the truth, honey.”

13th Annual RCLAS Write On! Contest 2025

Honourable Mention Fiction

SNAPSHOTS OF THE PAST © Lesley Hebert

Before Ukraine became a sovereign nation in 1991, it was independent of Russia for a single brief period after World War One.

When people ask me, “Davyd, where are you from?” I tell them I am from Eastern Europe.

When they ask about my family, I say I have none. It is less painful that way.

I did have a family once. I keep them with me in the crumpled, sepia photograph I always carry, that shows us, stiff and unsmiling, in our Sunday best.

Father stands in the centre, his back straight and proud, between my older brothers, Symon and Illya. They have long pants, but I am only twelve so I still wear short breeches. I stand next to mother, who sits in front of father with my little sister Olena on her knee. Mama wears a high-necked brocade dress and a wide-brimmed hat decorated with feathers. Olena is four. Her two thick blond plaits hang over a short, dark dress covered with a white pinafore. She holds a doll.

The photo is criss-crossed with cracks. The surface of the print has lifted off mother’s face, leaving a dirty white space where her nose and eyes used to be. Father and my eldest brother Symon stand in similar solid poses. They have the same aquiline noses and bushy eyebrows. My brother Illya is fair like mother. Three years older than me, he was the mischievous one. Even on this formal occasion there is a sparkle in his eyes.

As for my country, that existed for only a moment in time, what is there to say?

The date on the back of the photograph is January 25, 1918. My father had just been elected to the Central Rada.

Proud to be on the Central Council, he told us, “Ukraine is finally free of Russian domination. Our destiny is in our own hands.”

But German forces soon replaced the Russian troops. Protesters marched in the streets. German troops stormed the Central Rada, and the arrests began.

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The past had blown away like spring petals carried on the breeze. Only fragments of memory remain, faded as old photographs.

I remember grey-uniformed German soldiers marching my father away, his back bowed in defeat. I am still haunted by the emptiness in his eyes as he gave us a backward farewell glance.

When Symon and Illya told Mama they were going to fight for the Nationalists, she wept. “Symon, you are old enough to make your own decisions. But you can’t take Illya! He’s only sixteen!”

Illya answered with a swaggering boast. “I am old enough to fight for my country. I can shoot a rifle as well as anybody.”

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The day Mama gave me the photo, she lay dying of consumption, her face pale against the white hospital pillow, her sapphire blue eyes brimming with tears.

Her voice was weak. “They killed your father. Symon and Illya may never return from the army. You and Olena will be alone, Davyd. All you have is each other. Take care of her.”

She paused for breath. “Your Aunt Sofia married a Hungarian businessman, your Uncle Karoly. They live in Budapest.”

Mama turned the photo over. “Here is Aunt Sofia’s address. You’ll be safe there.”

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The ink on the back of the photo is faded now. I can barely make out Aunt Sofia’s address, written in Mama’s shaky hand.

I try to remember my thirteen-year-old self with a five-year-old sister to care for and no time to mourn my mother. Did we pack for the journey? How did I pay for our train tickets? I cannot remember.

I do remember how I damaged the photo. Before Olena and I left home, I picked it up from the dining table, folded it in four and put it in my boot for safekeeping.

When I opened the front door and reached for Olena’s hand, she ran back to get her doll. “I have to take Yaryna. I can’t leave her. She’ll be lonely.”

We caught the overnight train from Kyiv to Budapest. Olena lay with her head on my knee, Yaryna cradled against her chest. The doll’s long brown braid lay on its green satin dress. Its vacant brown eyes stared into space as I gazed blankly out of the window into the darkness.

Unlike Mama, who was tall and slim, Aunt Sofia was short and comfortably round like an apple. She squeezed me in her arms, then picked up Olena and kissed her.

“My poor darlings! You must be hungry. Come to the kitchen for something to eat.”

Aunt Sofia was a comfort. Uncle Karoly was a solid protective presence with a bulbous red nose and drooping black moustache. We felt safe here, at least for a while.

Then one night Uncle Karoly slammed down the newspaper he was reading, turned to Aunt Sofia and spouted an angry stream of incomprehensible Hungarian.

Aunt Sofia turned to Olena and me, concern in her eyes. “We must leave. The Romanians have invaded Hungary. There will be fighting in the streets.”

I protested. “But we just arrived! Mama said we’d be safe here.”

Aunt Sofia wrapped us in her arms. “It will be all right, my darlings. We’re going to our house in the countryside. We’ll be safe there.”

Olena clung to Yaryna as we loaded bags of supplies into Uncle Karoly’s black automobile. She gazed wide-eyed at the enormous headlights on the front of the brass-trimmed hood and screamed.

“It’s got bug-eyes. I’m scared!”

I knelt down to reassure her. “It’s all right. You won’t see the bug eyes when you get in the car.”

I picked her up and settled her between the bags on the back seat. I sat next to her, behind Aunt Sofia’s broad back. Uncle Karoly bent down in front of the car to crank the motor, climbed into the driver’s seat, and gripped the steering wheel with fierce determination.

The car bounced on the cobbled streets. Smoke drifted on the chill wind. Gunfire cracked in the distance. Two skinny children in ragged clothing scurried across the street. The boy looked to be about thirteen like me, the little girl about Olena’s age.

How easily, I realized, this could have been us.

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Images float in and out of my awareness. Some I wish would stay hidden.

At home in Kyiv, Olena always a happy chatterbox. But by the time she was seven, she hardly spoke. As we fled from Budapest to Vienna, then southward to Greece, she clung to Yaryna. The doll’s green satin dress was filthy and tattered, it’s hair loose and matted.

Olena carried her doll as we walked up a steep street lined with tall white buildings, their windows smashed, their stone façades washed clean by the pelting rain. Chunks of broken masonry were scattered along the road, which was flooded ankle deep with rushing rainwater.

I took Olena's hand as we paddled across to the other side. A tank loomed over the hill at the top of the street. Its caterpillar tracks churned through the swift flowing water as it drove down the road.

Olena dropped her doll. The water carried it away.

"Yaryna!" she cried.

Before I could stop her, she pulled away. She splashed along the road after her doll. She slipped, fell, and hit her head on a rock sticking out of the water. I watched helplessly as the tank roared towards her.

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These memories are too much to bear.

I prefer to think of myself, twenty-six and alone, staring at the statue of Liberty as I leaned against the rail of an ocean liner, my heart full of hope as we sailed into New York harbour.

I got a job at Macy's as an elevator operator. I started and ended work at the same time every day. I opened and closed doors, announcing floors. The boredom, the security of the unvarying routine felt secure, calming.

I met Maria, a woman from my country. We shared many bitter memories. We comforted each other.

My friends told me, "Davyd, you should head west to California. That's where the future is."

But I was tired of saying goodbye to familiar people and places, of running from one place to another. I had good friends in New York and a steady job. I was in love with Maria. That was enough.

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I have been in New York for six years now. Another war is coming in Europe. But I am safe here. My wife Maria and I can make a comfortable life together.

Sometimes people ask me, “Davyd, will you ever visit your folks in the old country?”

But I have no “folks,” only Maria. There is no “old country.” Ukraine survives only in our imagination.

So I simply say, “Now is not the time. One day, maybe.”

Fiction Winners & Honourable Mentions



Edie Reaney Chunn is a poet, musician, and playwright based on the unceded territories of the x̱məθḵwəy̱əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. Their poetry can be found in *filling station*, *Maisonneuve*, *untethered* magazine, and elsewhere. Edie enjoys working collaboratively & inefficiently on theatre projects, and other pursuits.



Joanne Betzler graduated from Simon Fraser University's Writers Studio and has several writing projects underway but most remain on hold as she navigates the complexities of publishing her memoir *Behind The Wheel*. Connecting with writers via SFU Writing Consults at New Westminster Public Library, The Forever Writers Club, various writing sprints and workshops, makes her happy.



Amber Fenik was born and raised in Perth, Ontario. She now resides in Ottawa, Ontario writing short stories in her spare time. Her work has been featured in several publications including but not limited to: *The New Quarterly* literary journal, *subTerrain* magazine, the Manitoba Writers' Guild *Beyond Boundaries III* anthology, the Polar Expressions anthology and Dawson City's *Klondike Sun* newspaper

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 /T&mz/ Review*, *EVENT* and *The Dalhousie Review*. Find her at mjmalleck.com



Laurel Howe was an IT consultant for financial firms. She is currently writing a novel as well as the occasional short story. Laurel belongs to the writing community in Port Moody British Columbia where she makes her home.



Lesley Hebert immigrated from the U.K. in the late sixties when the British music invasion met the hippie peace and love movement on the northwest Pacific Coast. She lives in New Westminster with a sociable husband and an anti-social cat. She teaches English to international students online and writes web content, travel articles, short stories and poetry. Her work has also appeared in *Shared Vision*, *Canadian Stories*, *The First Line*, *A Poetry of Place: Journeys Across New Westminster*, *Pocket Lint*, and *Immigration Diaries*.



Royal City
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write on! contest



Fiction Judge
Sharon McInnes



2025 WRITE ON! CONTEST

COMMENTS FROM OUR FICTION JUDGE

SHARON MCINNES



FICTION WINNERS

Fiction First Place: Edie Reaney Chunn – *ENTRIES*

Fiction Second Place: Joanne E. Betzler – *Gun Control*

Fiction Third Place: Amber Fenik – *Bus Fare*

Fiction Honourable Mentions

MJ Malleck – *Spring Chore*

Laurel Howe – *Granny's Chair*

Lesley Hebert – *Snapshots of the Past*

First Place *Entries* by Edie Reaney Chunn

"Entries" is the story of a girl who is fascinated—some might say 'infatuated'—with her friend's big sister. The author tells this compelling story in the second person, adding a level of intimacy and immediacy to the reader's experience. I can't compliment this piece enough. I felt like I was in the skin of the girl, who remains nameless, making it even easier to identify with her. But it's the deft use of language, imagery, and repetition that makes it all work so beautifully. I love, for example, this description of the first time the main character sneaks into the older girl's bedroom to read her diary: "... reading feels like diving into a cool lake in the middle of August: if I want to, I can swim all around that lake's edges and see everything that lives there or had been thrown in with the hope that it would be forgotten. You stop seeming like the sky – instead, you are a piece of the world reflecting it, one I throw myself into." Beautifully written.

Second Place *Gun Control* by Joanne E. Betzler

From the inciting incident (the husband of a pregnant woman pulls out a gun), through a series of events that add tension and drama, to the last line, where the wife says, "Over my dead body," "Gun Control" is a powerfully-told story. The contrast between the fears and worries of the main character (*What kind of Mom will I be?*) and the husband's anger (*Are you deaf? That fucking woodpecker is back*) sustains the tension throughout. Great writing.

Third Place *Bus Fare* by Amber Fenik

In this skillfully-crafted story, a man with an "undiagnosed personality disorder" asks the main character—whose life isn't what he had hoped for, either—for bus fare. On the bus, the one-sided conversation that ensues (*This isn't real, you know. None of it is. This isn't the way it's meant to be*) leads the main character to reflect on his own life, and on life itself. Superb dialogue and description.



**Write On! Contest
Administrator**

Angela Kenyon

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