



No. 11: Summer 2018

2018 Writing Contest Results...

Fiction

Non-Fiction

Poetry

Judges' Comments

*Check out our
website*

www.nswriters.org

Write On!

The Winning Issue

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

A Message from the Contest Coordinator

Doug MacLeod

I know you'll enjoy reading these winning selections from the 2018 North Shore Writers' Literary Contest. Congratulations to all the winners.

Writing activity on the North Shore continues to grow, and the quality is constantly improving. All members of the NSWA can celebrate this phenomenon.

Several people need to be thanked for making the 2018 contest a success: Kelly Hoskins for promotion, Mark Turris for graphics, Sonia Garrett for collecting submissions, and Wiley Ho for producing this winning edition of *Write On!* Along with the contest committee our thanks go to the judges for their hard work:

Fiction: Jackie Bateman
Non-fiction: Sylvia Taylor
Poetry: Bill Ellis
Youth: KC Dyer

There were innovations to the

contest this year. Contributing to the chatter and the excitement of the awards section of the North Shore Writers Festival this April was the sound of young voices. We created a youth category and were rewarded with some wonderful submissions from young writers. The future looks bright. Take a read and see for yourself.

This was the first year that judges were available to announce the winners at the Writers Festival and present the awards. It gave the event a special sparkle and provided judges with an opportunity to meet the person behind the words.

If you didn't enter a piece in this year's contest, there's always next year. Everyone wins. Even if you don't earn an award, entering the contest forces a writer to up the game and work at revising a piece of writing to make it extraordinary.

Once again, congratulations to the winners and to all writers who entered the contest. North Shore Writers' Association members stand up and take a bow. You continue to create a space where writers can meet, learn, develop, publish and win. ■



A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Congratulations to the winners of the NSWA’s 22nd Annual Writing Contest. They were presented with their awards at the North Shore Writers Festival reception in April. This newsletter is dedicated to the winning entries.

A writing teacher once said the act of writing is not complete until the writing has been put forth for reading. It takes courage and faith to put our stuff out there. So, kudos to all who submitted to the contest. Keep writing and sharing! It’s the only way to improve.

I wish you all a wonderful summer and look forward to receiving your submissions for the September issue of *Write On!*

Enjoy,
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Next 100 Word Challenge Theme:
outside the window

You may choose to include or exclude the specific words!

Submit your 100-word masterpiece to
editornswa@gmail.com
by August 31, 2018

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Submission Guidelines

- *Submissions can only be accepted from NSWA members*
- *Submissions to be sent to the Editor, at: editornswa@gmail.com (In WORD format within the body of the email, if possible; if not, a WORD attachment is acceptable. Illustrations in JPEG format.)*
- *Space is limited and lengthy submissions (700+ words) are therefore discouraged*
- *The Editor reserves the right to make revisions or corrections*
- *Publication in WRITE ON! is at the discretion of the Editor, in consultation with the Executive*

Disclaimer: Contributors are responsible for the accuracy, originality, reliability, etc. of the content of their submissions, and any views expressed are not necessarily those of the Editor and/or the NSWA.

**Deadline for the September newsletter:
August 31, 2018**



***North Shore Writers' Association
22nd Annual Writing Contest (2018)
Results***

Fiction

First Place: Toph Whitmore for *The Lars Toshiba Show (Aired September 26, 1998)*

Second Place: Cinda Morales for *The Neighbour's Statement*

Third Place: Brook Erickson for *Returned*

Honourable Mention: Laura Marr for *The Walk*

Non-Fiction

First Place: Rose Dudley for *Till Death Do Us Part*

Second Place: Wiley Ho for *Ambrosia*

Third Place: Sonia Garrett for *The Three Little Pigs*

Honourable Mention: Barb Reardon for *Shot Down*

Poetry

First Place: Chelsea Comeau for *Woman, Gone*

Second Place: Martha Warren for *The Lie*

Third Place: Trish Gauntlett for *Of A Certain Age*

Youth

First Place: Ross Manara for *Sherbert's Last Stand*

Second Place: Arshia Sorourian for *The Golden Mountains*

Third Place: Lucy Whitmore for *Bye Bye Rosie*

Honourable Mention: Laura Marr for *Witch's Brew*

FICTION: FIRST PLACE

Judge's comments: *This story is a clear winner, with a fluid and convincing voice. I entered the world of Brian Gumm and was reminded what it was like to be a teenager with all the confusion in the world mixed with all the raw ambition. The narrator's perspective is fresh, original, and witty.*

The Lars Toshiba Show (Aired September 26, 1998)

Toph Whitmore

"Hello and welcome to 'The Lars Toshiba Show.' I'm your host, Lars Toshiba, and today I'm chatting with a very special doctor who does stuff. He's a famous surgeon in Switzerland, Europe, and his name is Dr. George, uh...Gozinganingenen." "

I turned. The seat was empty. "Randy!" I hissed.

Dr. Gozinganingenen was over at the window arranging my mother's porcelain menagerie into obscene couplings.

"Randy, drop the pelican and get OVER here!"

My eleven-year-old neighbor looked at me, looked at the camera, and bounced back to the ottoman. Randy wore his Spiderman pajamas and green-frog galoshes, the ones with eyeballs.

Randy stared at the camera. It wasn't so much a camera as a shoebox wrapped in tinfoil with a styrofoam-cup lens. On the side was a Post-It Note that read "CAMERA X2-R13" in professional-grade Sharpie ink. When I turn eighteen, the public access channel legally has to reply to my emails.

"So, Dr. Gozinganingenen," I continued. "Tell us about your revolutionary surgery method of plastic surgery that experts say is revolutionary."

"Well, Señor..." began Randy. "...eez a varry deefeecult ting ..."

"Randy! I told you, *Switzerland!* You're supposed to be from Switzerland!" I'd worked with him for like ten minutes, but anything European was beyond him.

"You always pick the country! Switzerland sucks. Mexico!"

"Dammit, we're on the air!"

"I...don't...care. If I can't be Mexico Man, then I won't be on the show anymore times." Randy crossed his arms and raised his remaining eyebrow.

The geopolitical crisis threatened to escalate into another you-are-not-my-Mom hissy fit, followed by a crybaby surgeon storming off set.

"Okay, you can be from Mexico. But this is the last time. Geez." I chewed on the lapel of my blue blazer and hiked the sleeves up.

"Cool, Señor Toshiba," said a grinning Randy.

My name isn't really Lars Toshiba. It's Brian Gumm. But when you work in television, you have to have a cool name. For a while I did "The Eddie Potato Show," but that sounded stupid. I like "Lars Toshiba," but I'll switch to something new, you know, if a producer asks me to, or if I think of anything better.

My goal in life, my dream, really, though it's not so much a dream, for I know I will achieve it, is to host my own TV talk show (nationally syndicated, of course, with merchandising points on the back end). I am not yet thirteen, but many say I am as intelligent as someone much older, for I am wise beyond my years. I do not work with animals, not since the parakeet thing.

"Doctor Gozinganingenen," I continued, "What's so special about your method of plastic surgery?"

"Eez varry deefeerent..." Randy's gazed drifted to the vulgarly-positioned tchotchkes on the windowsill. I smacked him on the knee with the spatula ("MICROPHONE RX7-B12").

"OW!" he yelped. Randy punched my upper arm. I moved quickly to subdue the uncooperative surgeon.

"Look...uh...into the...camera!" I pinned his arm behind his back.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Okay, okay, God, I swear!"

There was a bang at the front door. With a loud grunt, my sister burst into the apartment.

"I won!" she screamed. "I won! I won, I WON!!!" Randy wiggled free.

"Dammit, Shannon!" I screamed. "We're on the air! Didn't you see the sign?"

"Where's Mom?" demanded Shannon, insinuating herself between the camera and on-air talent. She glared with the cruel confidence of someone who could easily take both of us.

"Laundry room!" I barked. "Now get off my set, I mean it!"

Shannon raced out. I returned to my interview. Randy had created a fort out of couch pillows and Mom's *National*

Geographic's. (Note to self: Find new guests.)

I made an executive decision and cut short the plastic surgery discussion.

"So, what have we learned today?" I stood and began my walking standup. (I had only five feet of space to work with, so I moved in slow motion.) "Plastic surgery is not something to be taken lightly. Consult with your doctor before plastic surgery." I made my trademark sweeping arm gesture. "Because...doctors are important. And so is, um..."

A loud crash interrupted my summation. Randy was back at the window. He had donned a decorative wooden mask and was jumping up and down. "I'm a monkey! Ooh, ooh, ooh..."

"Shut up!" I screeched. "I'm not finished! Join me next week when my guests will be Shaquille O'Neal and Britney Spears."

Randy chuckled, then froze, fixating on an indeterminate spot on the far wall. The mask slipped out of his hand and fell behind the couch.

"Now, Randy!"

"Now what?" he whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"The music! Do the music!"

"Oh yeah!"

Professional show-hosting has its compromises. Randy waddled over to the stereo and hit the "play" button. He sang along to Shania Twain with gusto, as though he'd just had a soda. I gnawed on my lapel.

My sister Shannon, through no fault of my own, is evil. She is two years older than me and wants to be a plus-size supermodel. (I added the "plus-size" part.) I tell her she's not smart enough. Then she sits on me.

I would like to have Shannon on my show someday, after I'm famous and she isn't. I would be all nice and such, and then I would destroy her with my deft interviewing skill:

ME: Shannon, first of all, welcome.

SHANNON: Thanks, it's great to—

ME: Tell me, what's it like being big as a TRUCK?

SHANNON: What!?!?

ME: You heard me, Fatty. Fatty Fire Truck—wee-oo, wee-oo...

Mom came into my room one night. I could see her serious-talk face in the dim red glow of my light-saber flashlight.

"Brian?" I put down *Entertainment Weekly* and my highlighter and braced for a lecture. It might be a while before I could return to "Red-Carpet Hair Don'ts."

"Tomorrow is a big day for your sister, and I want you to be supportive." Oh yeah. That would happen. "Aren't you excited about going to the TV studio?"

"Yeah, I guess. But I should get to be on TV. I'm the one with a show."

"Your sister entered the contest. She's getting the makeover, not you. Just think how beautiful she'll look."

Ugh. I played along. "How will they make her over?"

"Well, I guess new makeup or something. Maybe some rouge. Your sister could use help with rouge."

"So, she'll still be fat?"

"Brian! You *know* your sister is top-heavy. Be NICE. I expect you to act like the perfect gentleman I know you can be." Mom turned her glare into a half-smile. She kissed me on the forehead.

I pretended not to care about going to the television station. I pretended not to care about the five screens on the lobby wall, or my professional-looking sticker badge ("WCHZ TV8 VISITOR – BRIAN GUMM"), but I think Mom could see through my feigned indifference. She kept touching my head in that way that drives me crazy.

Mom wore church clothes. I was in my TV blazer, and Shannon wore some purple thing that made her look like an Easter egg. A woman named Barbara introduced herself. Barbara had wavy black hair that never moved, even when she shook her head. She finished each sentence with a snorting laugh.

"You must be Shannon," said Barbara (snort), who said she was a production assistant for "Afternoon, Milwaukee!" and was "so happy" to meet my sister. Shannon stared blankly. Oh yeah. This would be good television.

"And this is my son, Brian," interjected Mom.

"Actually, it's Lars. Lars Toshiba. I'm a talk-show host."

Barbara shook my hand, smiled, and squatted down in that way adults do when they want to make eye contact with kids. I considered pushing her over.

"Oh, that's so sweet, 'Lars.'" (Snort.) "Well, today you'll get a chance to see some real talk-show hosts in action." (Snort. Snort.) Her hair smelled like Dr. Pepper. Barbara patted me on the head. I could tell she had no future in television.

On the elevator, Barbara explained that we'd watch the live news broadcast before taping. When we reached the twelfth floor, I snuck off to the restroom.

I didn't really have to go to the restroom. I wandered down a hallway to a big room full of televisions and VCRs. I stopped in the doorway. In one corner, two men played basketball with a wadded-up piece of paper. To my right, a man in a white shirt and narrow tie wrestled with a cassette and a fussy video machine.

"Goddammit!" he yelled. "Where is my God-damned footage?!?" The wastebasketballers stopped briefly, then returned to their game. "DAMMIT!" screamed VCR guy, now pounding on the machine with his fist. "DAMMIT, DAMMIT, DAMMIT!!!" I backed away.

Mom, Shannon, and I sat on the floor of the "Sparky and Petey" set. I didn't see Sparky and Petey, but that was fine, since I don't watch that show anymore. Ten feet away were three big cameras on rollers, each with its own operator.

I closed my eyes. "With sports, Lars Toshiba! And Lars Toshiba live from the weather center! But first, here's Lars Toshiba with a breaking story." I looked around for Barbara. She should know I was available in case anything happened to the anchors, like laryngitis or assassination or food poisoning. I was wearing my TV blazer, after all.

A woman wearing a vest with lots of pockets shouted instructions to the three camera-people, pausing occasionally to listen to her headset. Josie Jackson and Dan Schiller entered through a blue door on the right. They have good names. Both looked down as they sat behind their long, curved desk. Josie Jackson opened and closed her mouth like she was in a yawning contest.

The music started up. (You know the song--"Thumpathumpathumpa, na na na NA NA na na...") But where was the weather gal and sports guy? Did Dan Schiller and Josie Jackson realize they were missing Kylie Hampton with the weather and Cal Curtis with sports? An announcer spoke over the music: "And now, here's your Action 8 News Team..." Vest woman counted down from five on her hand, then pointed at Josie Jackson.

I wanted to yell that "Action 8 News Team" was missing half its players. But I didn't. I watched, quiet, as Josie Jackson and Dan Schiller launched into the newscast. They fake-joked with each other between stories. They didn't talk during commercials, which we couldn't see anyway. Weather gal showed up during a commercial break. And then she did her thing...in front of a big green screen. I couldn't see any of the temperatures. The whole time she was doing the weather, it was a camera trick!

I looked at Mom, and she smiled. She seemed in on the whole deceit.

Cal Curtis arrived, finally. He was wearing a coat and a tie and...shorts! I wanted to yell that he'd forgotten to put his pants on. But I didn't. I watched, quiet, as he read scores and described highlights, fooling the world as if to say, "Hey, I'm a distinguished sportscaster, and for all you know, I'm wearing pants behind this desk." But he was no distinguished sportscaster. He was just some regular shorts-wearing guy.

Shannon got her makeover. The beauty people piled Shannon's hair on top of her head and painted her cheeks pink. Mom took pictures.

As soon as we got home, I ran into my room and shut the door. I balled up my fists and did my quiet scream for a long time, like ten seconds. I assessed my "camera." I grabbed the tripod and ripped it apart. It didn't matter, for it wasn't so much a tripod as cardboard tubes held together with duct tape. I crumpled the tinfoil, kicked the styrofoam cup, and stomped on the shoebox. I watched, quiet, as the Post-It Note floated to the ground. It landed next to *Entertainment Weekly*. ■

FICTION: SECOND PLACE

Judge's comments: *The visuals within this inventive story stayed with me. The Wiffle balls beating ineffectually yet with wild abandonment against the goons' Dodge is a wonderful image. A realistic and compelling voice.*

The Neighbour's Statement *Cinda Morales*

Step in here, Constable, and I'll close the lobby door. Now you can hear me better and still see what's outside. OK, I'll tell you what I know about Darlene and today's events.

I've known her for a couple of months, through our yoga classes. I last saw her yesterday for dinner at her apartment. She called it her last blast. Her landlord's goons would come over today to force her out.

She was the last tenant left in her building. Last month, the goons enforced illegal evictions on everyone else. I mean, do you really need to clear the whole building for new carpets? She wanted to show me that she wasn't scared of them, and that they weren't done with her.

I've seen the goons for myself: four loud guys in tank tops, who parked their black Dodge Ram truck in front of her building and snarled at anyone going in or out.

They would also blow up tenants' phones with nasty text messages at all hours. If you blocked their number, they'd just send you more abusive messages from another one. Oh yeah, the tenants called you, the police, about it, but they were told the threats weren't serious enough.

So last week, Darlene had to turn off her phone, get another one, and also get a court order to keep them away until today, which is when her lease ended.

While she was in court, the goons ripped out the carpet in the lobby, stairs, and hallways, and also turned off her electricity, just to make her uncomfortable.

You won't believe the crap Darlene put up with this summer. Her best friend Martha passed away just before the evictions started.

Oh yeah, back to last night.

After work, I went to her building with a shopping bag that held my flashlight and a bottle of ginger ale. That was around 7:30 pm, Constable. I also carried my Wiffle bat, just in case the goons violated the court order. Hey, so what if it's plastic? And Wiffle ball is a great game! Like a baseball version of street hockey. Anyhow, the goons didn't show up, oh well.

She came downstairs to open the door for me. Even with everything going on in her life, she looked awesome. Her gray hair was slicked up in a ponytail, and she was rocking her tie-dyed sundress. She reminded me of my Grandma before she got cancer. She waved her candle and said, "Hello Anna, tonight's theme is urban camping!"

We went up the uncarpeted stairs. When we got to her floor, I smelled pot and spray paint.

As Darlene led me down the hallway, my flashlight revealed the spray-painted messages: "Tenant Power" on one side and "Stop Renovictions" on the other. They were done in several shades of purple, red, blue, orange, and green. I didn't see who put up the graffiti, so you can't pin it on Darlene. Of course, her landlords would, and I figured she was counting on that today. She just laughed when I pointed out the vandalism, and we said nothing more about it.

When we went into her apartment, all I saw were candles and yoga mats at first. An old portable stereo played what sounded like a cell phone recording of a folk-rock concert, but it was really a cassette tape.

Darlene explained that she had already given away most of her stuff to her sister and others on the Island. I mentioned that my Grandma's friends moved to the Island last year. She smiled and said she was going someplace good after her protest here was done.

Darlene said she had invited the media over tonight, but they were all covering a rally downtown, something about house prices. My roommates had gone there too, because they heard there'd be music. They like being part of something big and important. Everyone else she invited had declined, because of the goons. So, it was just the two of us last night.

We went to her balcony. On her tabletop barbecue, she cooked rice in foil packets. The rice went into her veggie burritos. Yummy! She pointed to her portable stereo and said she got the recipe at that concert she recorded. I didn't know this, but decades ago, she and Martha spent a summer following a band from town to town. They camped out with other fans. Can't remember what the group is called, but the singer's name sounded like an ice cream flavor.

Anyway, things got a little sad when Darlene later told me how she found out Martha had died. She said got no answer when she called her landline or knocked on her door. When she phoned Martha's cell phone, it rang inside her apartment. So, Darlene went in with the spare key that her friend gave her. Martha looked like she was in a deep sleep, but she was really gone.

"At least she got to live out her life in her home," said Darlene with a sigh. She added that she felt very down after Martha died but started an antidepressant a couple of weeks back. It looked to me like she was feeling better.

Was she in a crisis? Oh no, Constable! She was stoked to take on the goons.

Now, where was I? Oh yeah, to lighten things up, Darlene lit up a big joint. She called it a doobie, and she shared it with me. Hey, it's legal now! Anyway, I only took a few puffs. The stuff went right up my nose and hit me in the eyeballs. But I felt pretty chill after that. The music on the stereo even sounded better. More trippy than folksy. Darlene got up and danced and hummed along to the songs.

After the tape ended, I asked her if maybe she was going too far with her protest. I was worried about you police showing up to drag her out.

She said, "Anna, you sweetheart, the cops will be coming by anyway."

I said, "Huh?"

She then pointed to a street light with ash particles dancing underneath it and said, "They'll be here to evacuate us once that forest fire hits town. I'll just get them here a bit earlier."

Darlene then showed me her old cell phone, the one she turned off because the goons kept spamming it with threatening messages. She turned it on and said, "Look, they can't even spell. They think "whore" and "bitch" are literally four-letter words!" We had a good laugh. I hadn't seen those texts before. She turned off that phone again and told me to take it home with me, "So you can mess with their heads later on. Have some fun, Anna!" I giggled, even though I didn't know what she meant. You know, pot makes everything funny.

We ate some peaches and finished the ginger ale. By then, her grill had gone cool. I helped her clean it out. She put the barbecue in her hallway closet, along with the unused charcoal. Oh yeah, Constable, there might have been aerosol cans of spray paint in there too, but I couldn't tell with just my flashlight. Hey, it's not illegal to put stuff away in your closet, even if you're moving out the next day. Sheesh.

Now back to last night, I offered to stay with her. But Darlene just showed me a sausage-sized doobie and said, "This is all the company I need. I'll be feeling really mellow tonight!"

At around 10:00 pm, I put my bat and her phone in my shopping bag, and I held my flashlight as she led me down the stairs. At the lobby, she said, "Thanks for hanging out with me. It's been a long strange trip. Have a good one."

I went to my apartment at the other end of the block. By then, the smoke from the forest fire made everything hazy. So, I was glad I had my flashlight as I walked past the unlit construction site between Darlene's building and mine.

When I got home, my roommates said they'd been back for about an hour. The rally dispersed after the anarchists and neo-Nazis arrived. I showed them the messages on Darlene's phone. They told me they could get behind her protest against the goons.

We packed our duffel bags in case we had to evacuate. We tried to sleep after that, but of course the smokiness made that impossible. Then at around midnight, we heard loud booms and later sirens.

I thought the forest fire had reached town. But when I went outside, I saw all those emergency vehicles in front of Darlene's building.

Her landlord's goons showed up too. I recognized their truck. One of them texted into his phone, and they all just sat inside the Dodge, staring at where Darlene's balcony used to be.

I didn't see Darlene, and then I remembered I had her phone. I went back home to check it. They had been sending their usual trashy texts up until 12:15 am, when their last message was, "WTF?"

So, I texted a reply, "Come and get me, you sissies."

I went back outside with Darlene's phone and my bat. When I got to their truck, they were still sitting there, shrugging at each other.

So, I texted them again: "Hey princesses, step out of your carriage. What, you gonna melt without AC?" Then I put Darlene's phone in my pocket.

As the goons looked at their phone, I tapped my bat on the hood of the truck. They bolted upright. Oh, the looks on their faces – priceless! Yes Constable, it was my Wiffle bat. And yes, just a tap.

Next thing I knew, my roommates emerged from the haze, carrying a bag of Wiffle balls. When they were a few feet from the truck, I nodded at them and got into the ready position for their pitches. I swung at the Dodge Ram each time. The goons just sat there, frozen, as I batted ball after ball at them. Those chickens wouldn't even lower their windows.

When my roommates got to the bottom of the bag, I heard someone behind me shout, "The old lady's dead!" I gripped my bat but otherwise felt numb. The goons sank in their seats as I stared at them for about a minute. Then I heard people behind me shout, "Incoming!" I stepped away from the truck to avoid a fusillade of eggs. The Dodge Ram then took off as more people came out to the street and shouted and waved their middle fingers at it.

My roommates are still out there with the rest of the neighborhood, singing that "na-na-na-na, goodbye" song. And Constable, you probably saw those people outside sharing pictures of the spectacle that Darlene created. She sure made a point, I'll give her that.

Yep, she kept her word today. You did come to get her – along with the coroner and all the fire trucks on this side of town. Had I known her entire plan, I would have called you guys and stopped her. I just wanted to support her emotionally last night. I did not want her to go out like this.

Oh, I forgot to mention something earlier. Darlene knew me from yoga, but we first met last year at a support group for caregivers. Martha and my Grandma had the same type of cancer. When they died, I inherited a condo, while Darlene got nothing but memories of a 50-year friendship. Maybe you can chew on that during your investigation.

Here's Darlene's phone. My roommates copied the messages, in case you police screw things up, just like you did when you ignored her and her neighbors last month. Thanks for listening, Constable. Now I'm done talking to you, and you're free to deal with the fires. ■

FICTION: THIRD PLACE

Judge's comments: *What began as a foggy, snow-covered story ended in 'the lightless light', a zombie-like and surreal tale of two missing girls. The premise was a compelling one that kept me intrigued to the end.*

Returned ***Brook Erickson***

Thick, frigid fog coated the wintery air just above the snow-covered road that stretched far through a dark pine forest. The winter tires on Melissa Gale's minivan skidded across the slick roads as they traveled deeper and deeper down the winding path. Stars peered through the canopies and treetops to watch the single car speed across freshly-made tracks on the scarcely-used road. As the terrified mother's minivan got closer to its destination, screeching sirens and flashing red and blue lights polluted the air.

As the minivan slid to a slow stop, Melissa spotted the bright yellow police tape being sprawled out between the towering pine trees. Beams of light shooting from flashlights searched the area for anything that could help the confused policemen conclude what exactly had unfolded before them.

"Ma'am," a concerned man in a blue uniform and shining gold badge called as Melissa Gale emerged from her minivan and stepped towards the crime scene, "you aren't authorized to be here." He walked over to Melissa, his hand extended, ready to push the mysterious woman away from the closed off clearing he stood in front of.

Melissa continued to scurry towards the clearing, seemingly not noticing the man in the blue uniform. Even as his arm clasped around her, keeping her away from her desired location, the frightened woman's eyes stayed fixated on the sight that lay just behind the bright yellow police tape.

"Rogers," shouted another man in a blue uniform, with an even bigger gold badge, "let her through, she's the mother." He stated fiercely. At his superior's orders, Rogers let his arm drop to his side, and watched as Melissa ducked hurriedly under the tape.

"My baby! My baby! What's happened to you?" She cried as she dropped to her knees in front of a body that lay atop a blanket of snow that coated the forest floor. Melissa cradled the limp body in her weak arms, planting a single kiss on the body's icy forehead. "Whitney..." she whispered as tears that had previously formed in the corners of her eyes began to fall.

Squeaking wheels rolled over the hardened snow, towards the grieving mother cradling her limp daughter. Paramedics dressed in white loaded the frail body onto the large gurney before then lifting the bed-like carrier into an ambulance.

Soon after, Melissa Gale was left standing in the middle of a clearing, her slippers and hem of her robe soaked from the frozen snow that had stroked it. Tears streamed down her face as she watched the ambulance speed away and disappear through the thick, frigid fog.

Fifteen-year-old Whitney Gale had been missing for twenty-seven days. Last seen December 30th, caught on a corner store security camera buying milk for her mother to use to make tea. She was wearing dark pants and a dark jacket when she had left on a simple errand which had decided the fate of her life. However, twenty-seven days later, when Whitney's body was found in Blue Creek Forest, she was wearing a pink tutu with purple shoes that barely fit over her toes, and a blue t-shirt that was five sizes too small.

Quickly, these peculiar items of clothing were identified as the clothes that another missing child, Ella Kingston, was last seen wearing at her fifth birthday party, two weeks before Whitney left to buy milk.

At first, police assumed this was the doing of a child abductor, who assaults children before swapping their clothes and leaving them in the middle of nowhere to be stumbled upon by joggers. However, this theory was soon debunked when autopsies reported that neither of the children had been assaulted. And there was, of course, the fact that Ella Kingston and Whitney Gale never truly *died*.

The chilly winter night of January 26th faded into the morning of January 27th as Melissa Gale frantically drove her minivan to catch up to the ambulance that had left their destination only minutes before she had. There were millions of thoughts running through her head as she rushed down the isolated road, but the only thought that her foot had, which was pressing harder and harder on the gas pedal, was getting to the hospital at the same time as the ambulance.

Meanwhile, the medics in the ambulance a mile up the road from Melissa were just as worried, if not even more, as the wailing mother. Most of the medics had had jobs similar to this one before: find a body, bring it back to the hospital, declare it dead, perform an autopsy. However, there was something different about this girl. There was something *wrong*. It was similar to when they had found the body of Ella Kingston two weeks prior. The body was dead in all ways possible. No pulse, no breathing, no signs of reactions to stimuli. But there was still something off about it. It was as if it were still alive, but not as a human.

“Collin,” murmured a particularly sceptical medic, positioned beside the back doors of the ambulance, “there’s somethin’ different about this one, too.”

Collin, a grizzly old man gleefully looking forward to retirement from his ‘underwhelming’ job and ‘attention seeking’ co-workers, rolled his eyes and sighed in annoyance. “Lily, you have to stop it with your dumb conspiracy theories.” He groaned angrily. “This is someone’s daughter we’re talking about here.”

“I know, I know,” Lily rubbed her temple, looking almost infuriated with her own words. “But I swear there’s somethin’ off with the latest bodies we’ve been gettin’. I haven’t seen too many bodies in my few years here, but I’ve seen enough to notice that these last few ones just ain’t right.” She glanced over at the stone-cold corpse that laid daintily in front of her.

Everyone in the room could feel it, too. There was most defiantly something eerie about the body, and it wasn’t just the fact that there was a dead body dressed like a child’s doll. Although none of them could speak it aloud, the body’s presence made each of the medics feel *watched* and almost *awake*. There was something otherworldly about this ‘dead’ girl, and every one of the medics could feel it.

Lily shook her head and looked back over at her unamused co-worker. “I know you understand what I’m gettin’ at here. I know it sounds silly, but I swear that damn thing’s gonna spring up from its li’l bed like some sort of Frankenstein’s monster.” She caught sight of Collin’s disapproving glare, and quickly corrected herself, “Fine, she might not be some sort of zombie, but there’s still somethin’ fishy here.”

Suddenly, the ambulance slowly rolled to a stop. The medics were all confused about the abrupt halt, because they all knew that the trip from the crime scene to the hospital took at least half an hour, even if they had been speeding, which they were. All of the passengers within the ambulance started muttering to each other before Lily finally decided to do something.

“Hey! What’s the hold-up! There’s no way we’re at the hospital already.” She howled to the driver, speaking the words that graced everyone’s minds. When there was no response from the other side of the sliding door, one of the curious medics tugged it open, only to witness a scene much more horrifying than the one they had been fleeing from.

Screams rang out from the back of the van. The eyes of both the driver and the police officer in the passenger seat looked as if they had been replaced with crimson red candles, then placed in front of a small sun.

The red, almost black goo drizzled down both their faces, and into the gaping mouths on their horror-stricken faces.

Soon, the terrorized medics calmed down, but only to notice the petite figure of a child standing in front of the ambulance. The blank-faced girl, presented with loose golden curls, dark pants, and a dark jacket, stared through the window. She was covered from head to toe in dirt and mud, with some blood stains scattered throughout. However, her clearly too-big clothes and revolting appearance seemed to leave the small girl unbothered.

“What’s your name, sweetie? Why are you so far from the city?” Collin questioned as he climbed from the doors of the ambulance. There were tears of horror rolling down his cheeks, and his voice cracked drastically as he spoke, but he reached out towards the child nevertheless.

The mud-splattered girl raised her head to face Collin. “I am here to collect my sister.” Her voice didn’t come from her mouth. All of the medics heard it, the monotone sentence sang from within their own heads, as if it were a thought.

Collin stumbled backwards, trying to catch his breath. His pulse raced and his hands grasped the side of the ambulance as he stuttered for words. “What are you, devil?” He yelped as he continued to trip over his own feet in attempt to escape the small, dirt-covered girl.

Another scream erupted from within the ambulance as a bright, white light shone through the windows and doors. A body dove from the back doors, collapsing and not moving as soon as it hit the ground. “I can’t see! I can’t see!” Lily called from the ground behind the ambulance.

“I am here for my sister.” This time the dull, emotionless voice only sounded in Collin’s head, for Lily had fallen limp, and the rest had candle eyes.

“Sister, let us return to the ones who saved us.” Another monotone voice sounded in Collin’s mind. This voice had the same dryness as the first, yet it seemed more matured. The body linked to the voice emerged from the back of the ambulance, wearing a bright pink tutu and a blue shirt, five sizes too small.

The two expressionless figures glided towards each other before linking arms and tilting their heads upwards, toward the star-filled sky. “We are ready to return.” The hypnotic voices rang in unison. An excruciatingly bright white beam of light poured down on the two robotic-like girls, incinerating the snow that blanketed the forest ground around them. Along with the snow, the watching eyes of Collin began to melt and drip out of his skull, leaving no one else to hear the last words of the two girls. “We are returning to the ones who saved us.”

As the mysterious light vanished from the sky along with the girls, a minivan pulled up to the abandoned ambulance. Out stepped a woman with drenched slippers and tear-soaked cheeks, gasping at the scene before her. To avoid taking in the horrific sight of the massacre, the grieving mother tilted her head back to the sky, taking in the now-lightless night. ■

FICTION: HONOURABLE MENTION

Judge's comments: *Imaginative and whimsical, The Walk has a deep sense of love and longing from a narrator who embraces his 'wrinkles of wisdom'.*

The Walk *Laura Marr*

The warm light of early morning was just beginning to kiss the dewy grass, the birds were waking up to grace the skies with their cheerful song; it was a perfect day.

"It's such a beautiful morning, darling. We should go out for a walk before the wedding," exclaimed Cornelius as he looked out the small circular window in the attic of their home. His voice echoed through the halls, bouncing off the countless photographs and happy memories hanging on the walls. "She must still be asleep," he thought to himself, "I'll wait 'til she's up so we can go together."

Waiting for his wife patiently, Cornelius found himself in his favourite armchair, the crinkling of the supple, dark leather greeted him like an old friend. He loved his chair, not for its looks, but for its stories. He loved it for all the warm embraces by the fire, he loved it for all the crosswords attempted on Sunday mornings, he loved it for all the tea sipped while watching the sunrise, when the rest of the world remained in sleepy submission. He loved everything about it. Each scratch, each wrinkle, reminded him of himself: "a wrinkle of wisdom," he'd say. For several hours he sat in that chair, his mind hopping in and out of lucid reality and the land of the dreaming. Perhaps he'd find his wife there, in amongst the dreamers, the hoppers, and the wishers. Perhaps there, they could walk along the boardwalk where they took their honeymoon, so many years ago.

With a warm toothy grin, Cornelius awoke to afternoon's brightness; it was time. Sarah would understand, she knows how much he loves days like today. He began to remove himself from his seat to go downstairs, peeling himself off the hot leather to stand up on his frail feet; the armchair and his back groaned in protest.

"That was a lot easier a few years ago," he chuckled to himself. With softly socked feet on rickety floor boards, Cornelius tiptoed downstairs, trying not to wake his love from her peaceful slumber. Creak. Creak. Creak. He weaved through their many photographed halls, starting and stopping like a broken-down car to look at each picture smiling back at him. Each face, each friend, each child, gazed at him from their little wooden frame; filling him with warmth and light. It was as if he had eaten a spoonful of honey, slowly running down his throat and filling his stomach with cozy bubbles. These bubbles, these memories, spread through his core, to his arms, to his legs, and lastly to his face, producing a bittersweet smile. Wiping away a reminiscent tear, Cornelius continued downstairs. Creak, creak, creak.

After what seemed like an eternity, he made it to the bottom. He could just barely see the glow of sweet sunshine emanating from their glass door with his wizened eyes.

"There's no time for shoes," Cornelius thought to himself. "It's too lovely a day to waste fretting over knots I can't tie." Despite the warm day, he quickly bundled himself in his peacoat and slipped on some reliable loafers. He could smell the open air now; it was so fresh and green: the time had come to finally journey outsi—

"You're not going out there are you?" A voice behind him murmured. Startled, Cornelius spun around: standing motionless, barefoot in a cotton and lace white gown, was Sarah. Cornelius didn't even

hear her; it was as if she were a cloud, silently floating through hallways and rooms without ever making a sound.

“Why yes, dear; I was just going to go outside for a quick jaunt around the neighbourhood before Grace’s wedding this evening. I waited for you, but I didn’t know when you’d be awake.”

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” exclaimed Sarah, pushing her wispy, long, white bangs out of her pale blue eyes. Cornelius loved the way she did that: ever since they were young, when they first met, she pushed her hair out of her eyes just like that; it was so familiar, yet so different. The endless, chestnut tresses that cascaded down to the small of her back, with time, had turned white and the bright, animated, sky blue eyes he fell in love with, with age, had clouded. In moments like these he missed their younger days, their younger selves, but he would never give up all the time, all the memories they shared together.

“You know I’ll always wait for you,” replied Cornelius. “There’s still time if you hurry up and get dressed. We could still go.”

“You know I can’t go with you,” she whispered. Her sweet grin had begun to fade, the rose in her cheeks becoming darker, paler.

“Of course you can come with me! A walk is not worth taking if I don’t have you by my side.”

“You’ll get on without me.”

“Nonsense, I always need you, my love.”

“And I need you, so won’t you stay at home? With me?”

Weighing his options, Cornelius paused. Anxious silence, so thick you could cut it with a knife, filled the air of their quaint foyer. Should he continue on his walk anyway, all by himself, all alone? Or should he stay, and be wrapped in Sarah’s loving arms forever.

Suddenly, the phone yelled, frightening Cornelius from his reverie. Still pondering his options, he let it ring in its annoyingly loud way.

“Hi, Granddad,” the answering machine spoke, “it’s Grace. I hope you’re still able to come tonight, I’ll try calling back again soon...I miss you, Pop Pop, I haven’t seen you in so long...I know it’s really hard, but it would mean the world to me if you could come and give me away, I really want to have you there.” The sound of Grace trying to hold back tears echoed through the house, “Please, Granddad... I love you.” With a sniff and a click, the message ceased, but the sadness in Grace’s voice remained in Cornelius’s heart: she would be heartbroken if he couldn’t go.

“We should get going now.”

“I have to stay here.”

“Sarah, it’s time. We need to leave, are you coming?”

“You know I can’t go,” she said wistfully.

Intent on being there for his granddaughter, Cornelius stretched out his speckled, withered hand to the doorknob.

“Will you be alright on your own?” Cornelius asked.

“I’ll be just fine; but if you leave, I won’t be here when you get back, but I know you love me, and will always hold me in your heart.”

And with those final words giving him her blessing, Cornelius grasped the polished, cool knob, carefully turning it, to reveal the outdoors. He glanced reminiscently over his shoulder into the empty house; and began to take his first steps outside since the death of his beloved Sarah, one year ago. ■

NON-FICTION: FIRST PLACE

Judge's comments: *Elegant, raw and powerful, this courageous life-reveal examines the dark corners and closets of commitment, the edges between love and duty. As the cruel thief of mental illness steals piece after piece of their lives, we go beyond the romantic, the brave hopefulness, to the emotional poverty of relentless service.*

Till Death Do Us Part

Rose Dudley

Heedless steps propel me along. How many times have I walked this way unseeing? What drives me to return day after day? Is it pity, a sense of duty or fear of being judged if I can't uphold that promise made before the altar – "Till Death do us part? But how does one define death? Death, I have learned, can take on other forms.

A college student walks towards me, eliciting a momentary flash from the past. His mien is one of strength, of confidence, of a bright future yet to be drowned in life's uncharted waters.

"Lovely day," he says.

"Is it?" I muse. Yes, there was a time when I would have been inspired by skies so blue and marvelled at the blazing reds and golden yellows in the trees above. I would have been stirred by that gentle wind scattering leaves and revelled in the warm, comforting smells of autumn bonfires, but nowadays, my senses cleave to shades of grey. Treading carefully over the uneven pavement, I see only gnarled and knotted roots spreading like a cancer, cracking wide the cement. The irony is not lost on me.

The metal gates grate on the brick path, as I push them open. It is just steps to the door with its shrill bell. I ring and wait for familiar shoes pounding the tile, the unseen hand pressing the code to release the barricade against the outside world.

"Hello, Hannah, your husband is poorly today, I'm afraid."

Do I feel relieved to hear this news? On good days, the guilt swamps me in a tidal wave as he pleads, "Take me home, please, please take me home." Bad days ease my conscience like the ebbing tide.

Hugh shuffles in, pyjamas hanging loosely on his emaciated frame. He shows no hint of recognition. I hug him fleetingly, repulsed by the sharpness of his bones through the cloth and the sickly smells emanating from his body. His hair is matted. He badly needs a shave. With my help, he drags himself back to his room through narrow, dark corridors and a communal room where old people stare from empty faces or shout inanities to anyone and to no one. "Abide With Me," playing through a loudspeaker adds to the pitiable scene.

Entering the room, Hugh flops down on the bed, taking up the foetal position. The walk has exhausted him. I try to engage him in conversation but, today, he is fixated on a series of meaningless numbers which he repeats in answer to my questions.

“Has anyone been in to visit you today, Hugh?” I ask. “Five, ten, six, four eight,” he responds. I attempt to show him family photographs. He looks at them vacantly, scrunching up the hem of his pyjama jacket. “Five, ten, six, four, eight,” he says again. Further questions elicit the same reply, so I give up. The silence becomes oppressive. I check my watch for the third time, wandering around the room tossing out cups of cold tea and rotting fruit.

“You didn’t eat your grapes again,” I try.

Suddenly animated, he begins to scream: “Get into the uniform, get into the uniform! They’ll kill us if we’re not in the uniform! Look out for the arrows! Get down!”

I try to control his movements as he clammers from the bed, removes his pyjamas and rummages through a drawer in search of the ‘uniform’ before sinking back to the bed, naked and exhausted.

I watch him twitching and writhing as he descends into troubled sleep. I am too wrung out to contemplate leaving. I ask myself, “How can this be the man I married—robbed of all dignity—the man I once loved but for whom I now feel only pity? I reflect on the words of Mary Doria Russell in her book, *Children of God*, which are so applicable to my roller-coaster of a life: “Love is a debt. When the bill comes, you pay in grief.”

I cannot suppress my tears, as I struggle from the chair to throw a blanket over Hugh’s skeletal frame. That youth I glimpsed on the street has reminded me of my first meeting with Hugh—surrounded by students in the college bar—the centre of attention—handsome, athletic, intelligent, personable—exuding confidence. It was no surprise that he became President of the Students’ Union. I was flattered that such a charismatic, popular young man had eyes only for me.

Together, we attracted a circle of friends, married young, bought a home, had children. Hugh quickly moved up the ranks in his chosen field. My life was comfortably predictable.

And then, in an instant, my world collapsed around me. I came home to find Hugh slumped on the couch crying uncontrollably. Had I been missing something?

“Your husband is having a nervous breakdown,” the doctor told me.

“Impossible,” I whispered, yet, when I recalled, hadn’t there been warning signs all along? That extra glass of wine, another cigarette, heated arguments with friends, sleepless nights. With my demanding job, while caring for an ailing mother and two small children, I had failed to register the changes.

Can I be blamed for what ensued? I so easily acquiesced to the doctor’s suggestion of heavy sedation, of drugs for depression and anxiety and an appointment with the first of a succession of psychiatrists—the beginning of a heart-breaking journey with no turning back. I think of all the futile attempts Hugh made to return to work, followed by months of depression as he came to realise that he would never regain the mental fortitude to continue in a career that he had loved. I consider the effort he made to find work in other fields and the anxiety it caused us both as he filled out applications, appeared

for interviews and met with nothing but failure, sinking him to new lows. I remember the day he was finally diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. What followed? More medication, more experimentation, more psychiatrists.

Hugh begins to stir, sits bolt upright and stares at me with hate and anger in his eyes.

“Aren’t I the one who is entitled to be angry?” I scream from inside. “For years, I have tolerated your unpredictable behaviour that landed you in psychiatric wards in your very low periods and took you to car dealerships and stores to buy items that we could ill-afford on your highs. What about the constant apologies to neighbours awoken by you mowing the lawn at 4 a.m., family holidays ruined by your bizarre antics and embarrassment over your compulsion to photograph young women in bars? Don’t you think I became weary of searching for you when you went missing for hours and of calls telling me that you had caused a ruckus in a bar? Who was the one who had to make excuses for you after your shop-lifting sprees? Do you have any idea how I came to dread social gatherings which inevitably ended in arguments with friends or a bitter quarrel over your drinking? If only you had a shred of understanding how soul-destroying it has been for me accompanying you on this endless journey searching for answers. Were you at all sympathetic when my health began to fail? —the panic attacks—dizzy spells—stomach pains—the result of the stress that I have endured over the years. Oh yes! I was sympathetic when our love was strong, but understanding eventually turned to frustration, and now that I can no longer feel any love for the stranger you have become. I’m angry—yes, angry!”

Mentally exhausted by my silent rage, I haven’t the strength to leave. I return to the day three years ago, when this present nightmare began with the doctor prescribing steroids which, I have learned, can be dangerous for a bi-polar patient. Hugh had disappeared in the night and was found wandering in a city far from home carrying a backpack full of odd shoes and books and the home telephone which he had torn out of the wall. He could give no explanation when he turned up in a taxi next day. He was as confused as I. Drained of emotional and mental stamina, I called the psychiatrist. Perhaps, I should have tried harder to understand, but I couldn’t take it any more.

Much calmer now, I continue with my private monologue: “Hugh, you will never know how hard it has been, visiting you almost every day for nearly three years, traipsing from one hospital to the next, to a care-home and then on to yet another hospital after you were evicted for smashing windows, stealing from other patients and climbing into their beds. You’ve seen more psychiatrists than I can count, all recommending different drug combinations without consultation with the previous psychiatrist. You can’t remember how you were affected by the 12 treatments of electroconvulsive therapy that were administered, followed by a complete blood-plasma exchange when one specialist diagnosed auto-immune encephalitis. The medical emergency that resulted from that treatment put you in an intensive care unit at the brink of death, while I tried to comfort our daughters as they watched you fighting for your life. It’s been hell on earth.”

In my reverie, through blinding tears, I peer at the frail body under the blanket. “Oh, how kind it would have been for both of us, if you had died then and set us both free,” I mouth, as I leave him sleeping and find a nurse to punch in the code, releasing me into my cruel world.

Tears flow unrestrained, as I pick my way back over those spreading cancerous roots and the rough pavement. On the bus ride home, I cower at the back, burying my misery from the world. I check messages—only one from Matthew today, an air of finality about it: “For God’s sake Hannah, you are 70 years old and alone. Are you never going to take me up on my offer? You know that Hugh will not recover. He’s dead to you, your girls, your friends—everyone. You have got to think of yourself—for the years you have left. Who cares what people say? They won’t blame you. They know how you’ve suffered, and I know, more than anyone, how alone you are, but, Hannah, it’s up to you now.”

I normally delete Matthew’s messages immediately, but I keep this one. I am fond of him, but how can I regard him as more than a friend while the relics of a husband are weighing so heavily on my heart.

Back home, I cobble together a simple meal and eat it mechanically, eyes fastened on Hugh’s empty chair. I toy with the phone, reading Matthew’s message repeatedly. I’m so torn, but the specter of a sick man clutches me in its vice-like grip. I read Matthew’s message one more time, and, not without misgiving, I press delete. ■

NON-FICTION: SECOND PLACE

Judge's Comments: *Steeped in rich and precise detail, our senses are awash with an adventure-memory as delicious, nourishing and satisfying as the fruit it glorifies. But like any complex brew, this ambrosia has a piquant note that reminds us that harvest and sacrifice, underpinned by love, comes in many forms.*

Ambrosia **Wiley Ho**

She was holding up a golden peach in one hand and waving down traffic with the other. A tiny figure in a wide-brimmed hat, she stood near the line of cars wending haltingly down the steep mountain pass. Several cars had already been lured in. The thought of fresh fruit after our dusty hike to the top of La-La-Shan was appealing. We asked our driver to pull over on the narrow shoulder that served as a parking lot for the fruit stand. The makeshift stand – a piece of plywood resting on homemade sawhorses – was covered in boxes of yellow peaches. A faded red tarp provided shade from the baking sun. Beyond the fruit stand unfolded layers of deep green: wild forest mixed with neat orchards. Stepping from the car, I almost stumbled from the heady aroma of tree-ripened peaches, the scent so intense I steadied myself on my husband's arm.

I asked the peach lady, whose cheeks glowed with health, where the peach grove was. Still holding her golden prize high in one hand, she gestured over her shoulder. We gazed past her, out to the layered forests, down to a sweeping valley below. Just beyond the road we were standing on, the land sloped away. Row upon row of stout trees formed a terraced orchard that stepped down, down, and disappeared from view. We knew they were peach trees only because the rosy cheeked proprietress said so. Each leafy tree was laden with curious white paper bags, giving the orchard the appearance of being tended by a forgetful giant who posted notes to himself. She explained that each fruit had been wrapped in a paper bag to repel birds and insects. It was labour-intensive organic farming.

The orchard was accessible by irregular steps cut into the earth. Next to the uneven staircase, a thin single-track of steel curved down and dropped from sight. My husband let out a long low whistle and made me ask the peach lady in Mandarin: *Is that a funicular?*

“Yes, it's a kind of train,” she replied. “Wait two minutes and you can ride it. Pick your own fruit.”

The picturesque fruit stand was particularly alluring to tourists like us. After enduring a long, Canadian winter, it was impossible to resist the heavenly scent of peaches in their prime, their perfume drifting lazily through the tropical air.

As we waited two minutes, then five, the peach lady presented us with a platter of sliced peaches. “Try, try,” she insisted. The peaches had been cut into thin segments on purpose. Each slice was a gossamer curtain through which the sun easily shone, casting a golden sheen on the hand. The peach was toothsome and fleshy, the juice a trickle of honey down the throat. It had a rejuvenating effect on us after our hot day of hiking. Watching our appreciative faces, the peach lady regaled us with statistics: it takes a whole decade before a peach tree will yield a good crop; this orchard clinging to the mountainside was planted by her father nearly three decades ago; and, it would take just one serious typhoon to wipe out the entire grove. She let these facts sink in as we drank in the nectar.

A deep rattle shook the ground. The funicular tram had arrived. Except it wasn't a tram. It was a wheelbarrow – larger than usual and modified to fit the track – but definitely a wheelbarrow. A sinewy man

hopped out and tipped his peaked bamboo hat at us. I was stunned to see, under the hat's brim, the leathery face of an old man.

"This is my father," the proprietress said. "He is nearly eighty." We stared from the peach lady to her father. Her fathomless glow next his nimble vitality was more effective than any ad for fresh produce. The bamboo hat bobbed as the farmer nodded at us and, with a tanned hand, gestured towards our ride.

I glanced dubiously at the wheelbarrow, but my husband was already climbing in. "Let's go. I'll consider this my birthday present."

The peach lady didn't know much English, but she'd caught "birthday". Her bright smile lit up even more. "Huppy bird day!" she beamed and told us that the orchard experience was a must. There was, she said, usually a charge for the tour, but today, no, no. "Bird day present."

It was useless for me to protest since my husband had already settled into the wheelbarrow. He and the farmer were admiring the thin track and the motor, wordless male bonding. The farmer helped me into the wheelbarrow and advised me to crouch as low as possible. He hopped in behind me in his black gumboots. Without so much as a warning, the farmer engaged the engine. An ominous clatter lurched us on our way. Thankfully, the thing could only manage five km per hour. The engine whined and the overladen wheelbarrow rattled across the tiny platform on the road before suddenly heaving downward. My husband was tipped to the front of the wheelbarrow, me squashed against his back, and the farmer and his gumboots pressed behind me. Sardined in our metal can, we inched down the track, at a thirty-degree pitch.

"Hang on", the farmer finally remembered to say.

White-knuckling the sides of the wheelbarrow, I squealed, porcine-like. My husband rumbled with laughter, clearly enjoying his birthday ride. The commotion of our wheelbarrow and my shrieking scattered the birds in the area and briefly silenced the cicadas.

"This thing is primitive but brilliant," my mechanically-inclined husband enthused. "There is no opposing tram to counterbalance ours."

"What!" I yelled.

"It uses counterweights." He shook his head. "Genius."

We descended steeply past several terraces. The mountainside thickened with dark green foliage and little white bags of precious fruit. The waxy leaves of the peach trees provided us with dappled shade and the air gradually cooled. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the farmer remove his hat and fan his face.

"How much farther?" I asked in a prisoner voice.

The farmer didn't answer but looked thoughtfully at his trees. He slowly waved his hat in the languid, perfumed air, like someone swirling a drawn bath. We clanked down several more terraces before our wheelbarrow came to a sudden halt. We were still at a thirty-degree tilt.

"Doesn't this track go farther? Ask him." My husband sounded disappointed. He wanted the works.

The farmer motioned for us to climb out. It was time to start picking fruit. He leapt out of the wheelbarrow and started tugging me out. Reluctantly, my husband followed. Stepping safely onto a terrace, I asked the farmer how many trees he'd planted here.

"About five thousand." The farmer handed us each a plastic pail. "We're only a third of the way down the valley."

"What did he say?" My husband was peering eagerly over the ledge.

"Oh, we're near the end." I said, strolling away with my pail. The trees had been pruned for easy overhead picking, each branch smothered in jade leaves and milky pouches.

The farmer demonstrated proper peach-picking technique. "The fruit is wrapped in these white bags a few weeks before they ripen. They act as protective jackets for the peaches and help to ripen the fruit evenly." He squeezed a bag gently. "No need to remove the bag. Just feel the fruit inside. Pick the biggest ones."

A tentative peel, a little twist and the fruit came off. The smell of the fruit rivalled any perfumery. It didn't take long to fill our pails. Mesmerized by our treasure hunt in Eden, I wanted to linger forever.

"Don't forget," the farmer added. "You buy what you pick!"

We followed the farmer back to the wheelbarrow and reluctantly bade goodbye to the peach grove. Riding back up the track was less harrowing than the teeter down. We resurfaced near the fruit stand, where the peach lady was tying up a box of peaches for our taxi driver. The driver handed her a one-hundred Taiwanese note, the equivalent of about four Canadian dollars. She quickly pocketed the money. Our driver flashed us a smile and said he'd wait for us in the taxi.

The peach lady turned to me and asked how we'd enjoyed the orchard. I said we loved it. My husband stayed chatting with the farmer, asking questions about the funicular. He asked in English and the farmer answered in Mandarin, but they seemed to understand each other.

"Look at all the fruit you picked," the peach lady said. "Let me pack them for you." She unwrapped our harvest one by one. Peach after golden peach emerged from their pale shrouds, each a heart-shaped orb with shimmery satin skin. She nestled each fruit into Styrofoam-padded hollows, six to a box. Five boxes in total. Thirty peaches looking regal in velvety seats.

"How much a box?" I pulled out my travel wallet.

"I give you a good deal for bird day, okay?" Her eyes glowed. "Four hundred."

"Four hundred for the five boxes? That's very nice, thank you."

"Four hundred *per* box", she radiated a Buddha smile. "Together, two thousand only."

I gulped as I made the currency conversion. Two thousand Taiwanese was eighty Canadian dollars – three bucks a peach? It was highway robbery. "But, didn't you just sell a box to our driver for one hundred?"

Her voice was sweet as the peaches. "You picked special fruit. Bird day peaches."

I gawked.

She smiled back.

“Two thousand?” I squeaked.

“I’m so glad you and your husband had a nice time in our orchard.”

“But two thousand?” I hated that my voice was acquiring an edge of hysteria.

“Our peaches are voted best in all of Taiwan,” she said in a way that somehow sounded generous.

“Yes, but that’s an exorbitant price.” Why was I feeling defensive and cheap? I looked over to my husband. He was inspecting yet another piece of equipment with the farmer and looking royally entertained.

With a sigh I handed over the full sum. I knew when I’d been defeated. I called my husband over to help me with the boxes of fruit. He shook hands with the farmer and strode over.

“Enjoy the special peaches,” she smiled, handing the boxes to my husband.

As our driver loaded our precious cargo into the trunk of the taxi, my husband and I slid into the backseat.

“That was a blast. Thanks for being such a good sport.” He gave me a big hug. “So, how much were those peaches?”

I looked into his shining eyes and found myself in dawning agreement with the peach lady. This had been a special day, hadn’t it? Didn’t we just harvest the best peaches in a little corner of paradise? And, what was the right price for ambrosia?

I sank back in the seat, tired but contented. Perhaps it was adrenaline from the funicular or the magic of the orchard, but I felt like a million bucks. “The peaches were a bargain, honey,” I beamed at my husband. “A real bargain.” ■

NON-FICTION: THIRD PLACE

Judge's comments: *In the timeless tradition of myths and legends, fables and fairy tales, this deceptively simple and charming story cleverly juxtaposes metaphor, magic and memoir. At turns light and dark, the courageous reveal of a life journey struggling towards balance and autonomy, resonates in all of us as we navigate our own path.*

The Three Little Pigs

Sonia Garrett

We all have different sides to our personalities. For me, artistic, ambitious, and pragmatic traits haven't always coexisted harmoniously. Like the ego, id, and super-ego these qualities have bickered, struggled for supremacy, and occasionally given each other just enough space to fail. They're like siblings, but to understand my history requires some wisdom, the kind probably best told as a fairy tale.

Once upon a time, there were three little pigs, which co-existed in the same human psyche. Together, the artist, the achiever, and the peacemaker, left home to seek fame and fortune in the Big Wide World.

The first little pig was called Fifer. At eighteen, she craved recognition. She loved to dance barefoot in the moonlight, to be caressed as a woman, and to express secret desires in poetic utterances of epic proportions. She longed to be free from the rules of school, church, and family. So, she packed a suitcase, took her hard-earned escape fund, and turned her back on the restrictive, suburban homestead.

Soon, she found a man selling one-way tickets to Europe. Perfect. She could reinvent herself. Gone would be the diligent A-grade student, desperately seeking approval. Gone would be the conscientious good girl, trying to gain attention with hard fought exam results, and expected diligence.

She changed her accent, cut her hair, pierced her body, and stopped eating meat. The world glowed like golden wheat ripe for harvest. She loved the giddy excitement of the parties, the hours spent sitting around in pubs, and at dinner tables discussing Existentialism, Jung, and marijuana cultivation. She shunned conversations about her past, ignored the pressure of familial expectations, and feigned extroversion.

"Just don't give yourself away," became her inner monologue.

Fifer cultivated the appearance of ease and wellbeing. She played pool with a transvestite in a Manchurian bar as if it had been a weekly event since childhood. She silently fended off drunken advances from lecherous middle-aged men, resisting the impulse to run home, and even marched for Nicaragua without admitting ignorance about where it was, or why the protest was necessary.

Moving was easy. One bag, maybe a few books in an empty banana box, and on to the next adventure. Always one-way tickets, new towns, new jobs, new relationships, few possessions, and few maintained friendships. She carefully reworked her story to suit the audience. She sang her own song, to the beat of her own drum, but the inner monologue took energy to tame.

Animal lust briefly forced past reasoning under the surface. Only to find it reappear, louder, and more inconvenient when the carnal act was over. Satisfaction was sought in multiple partners, each lasting only a few intense hours, days or weeks. Until, grasping at straws, she found a partner, so deeply embroiled in the liberal philosophy, she was able to share her hastily erected home. She read what he read, ate what he ate, and agreed to the holidays he wanted.

She turned a blind eye to the incompatible moments, fearing they would expose her. The cringe worthy negotiations with a roadside chai merchant in Rajasthan, when her partner demanded black tea served without sugar. The proclamation he made about the importance of remaining childless in an overpopulated world. The way he idolized the Bloomsbury Group for their intellectual, and sexual freedom.

Even the decision to marry was an attempt to cover an embarrassing silence when conversation ran dry on a wet Sunday afternoon.

Then one day, The Big Bad Wolf knocked on the door. He was dressed as one of her husband's students, and wanted to share Fifer's marital bed, and home.

“Little pig, little pig, let me come in.”

“Not on the hair of my chinny-chin-chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house in.”

And the wolf huffed, and he puffed, and he blew the house in.

Fifer ran and hid, allowing Fiddler to take centre stage.

Fiddler was an aspiring A-type personality, a lean triathlete, and hungry for success. She had lived in the background of Fifer’s story, waiting restlessly in the wings. She was sickened to have reached the age of thirty with only a few coins in her pocket. Oh, that poor, deluded part of her personality had some great tales but she was single, homeless, and unemployed.

Fiddler pushed Fifer into the basement of the wooden mansion, built on splintering scaffolding. There Fifer sat, surrounded by the possessions her ex decided were not his, an enormous box T.V. from Fifer’s dead grandmother, ‘her’ CDs, books, and the wedding present from her disappointed father, an antique writing desk. Fifer sat at the desk, angrily scrawling in her journal, and ranting against the world.

Fiddler was different — a go-getter, an over-achiever, out for success. She’d met a man who sold her *The Idiot’s Guide to Wealth and Happiness*. Business was the way forward. The teaching qualification sat, unused, in the back of the filing cabinet. A once in a lifetime opportunity came her way. An internationally recognized brand was looking to expand its territorial reach. Fortune was guaranteed in the spreadsheets Fiddler was only just learning to read. Six figure income, only ninety-five percent borrowing required.

Opportunities abounded. Social housing with rent paid directly from the government; a rental property in a booming area, no deposit required, easy finance terms; investment in a .com start up company; even an international property development was seeking investors.

Her parties were big and loud, three hundred guests, no expense spared. The trappings of affluence, and leisure filled the garage. There were dog walkers, cleaners, au pairs, and gardeners. Her home was extended, refinanced, improved, and remortgaged. Everything seemed possible, first class air tickets, expensive holidays, new kitchens, even a Jacuzzi on the brand new, hardwood deck.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” said Fiddler.

Then one day, the Big Bad Wolf, dressed as a debt collector, knocked on the door.

“Little pig, little pig, let me come in.”

“Not on the hair of my chinny-chin-chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house in.”

And he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew the house in.

Fifer and Fiddler squealed all the way to Practical’s, running as fast as their little legs would carry them.

Practical had attempted to stage-manage and prompt the louder personalities over the years. But her advice was shouted down as dull, predictable, and limiting. The worry she bore, and her desire for stability, showed in the middle-aged hips, and easy-care wardrobe. She had had enough. Although Fifer and Fiddler were reluctant to listen, Practical forced them into rented accommodation.

“We have to buy!” shouted Fiddler. “Look at the rising markets, the opportunities...”

“First, we’ll consolidate,” replied Practical.

She worked part-time at a local pre-school. Collected her child from school, made home cooked meals, and stuck to a budget.

“Let’s explore!” shouted Fifer. “There’re adventures on the water, a sailing club nearby, a job in the Yukon, a season in the Rockies...”

“First, let’s make a base,” replied Practical. “We’ll pack sandwiches, hike the trails, decide which possessions we use regularly, and sell the rest. We have too much. Skis, SUPs, kayaks, bikes, climbing gear...”

“We’ll get a bigger house,” Fiddler insisted.

“We’ll get a house we can afford,” replied Practical.

“A storage unit?” asked Fiddler.

“No!”

Practical built her house with deep foundations. She searched for her ideal location, knowing the area, knowing her needs, and desires. She paid a healthy deposit, borrowed what she knew she could afford, and went about preparing for the move.

The unused Skidoo was sold. The cash would pay for necessary repairs to the old house without sea views. Fiddler's extravagant furniture was measured, some given away, and some kept. Fifer's part-finished projects were purged.

"We could sell it all," Fifer suggested. "Live in a trailer. Who needs a house?"

"Flip some properties, start a business, get rich quick," Fiddler continued.

They talked while Practical set to work. Chattels were de-junked. The Thrift store welcomed all the donations. Investments were analyzed. The lawyers did well. Ancient papers shredded, boxes packed, furniture wrapped, and protected. It was time for all three little pigs to do well.

Moving day was hot and sunny. Practical was up early, and swam in the cool, still water that was walking distance from her new home. Each stroke reminded her of the hours spent training as a child. A rhythm set in. One, two, three breathe. One, two, three breathe.

"If this house is to become a home, there must be space for all three sides of my personality," Practical said.

There was no time to argue. Fifer eyed the lean, tanned body of the Brazilian moving boss. Fiddler wished for an exotic holiday, while someone else sorted the house. While Practical calmly directed the furniture, and boxes to their pre-designated resting place — master bedroom, living room, office, and kitchen.

Fifer ran to her writing desk and scribbled some notes.

"Just five minutes," Practical chastised. "Then cover the desk. We'll paint before we unpack."

Fiddler looked at the office. So empty after all the sorting. There must be something new to fill the space.

Practical took few pauses in her efforts to fill holes, sand walls, paint, clean, cook, wash clothes, deal with ant infestations, and clear the garden of twenty years of neglect.

"There'll be space for us all in this house," she said.

In time, the house became a home. Fifer had her flights of fantasy every day, writing at the antique desk, marveling at the generations of wordsmiths that fixture had satisfied. Fiddler had a new goal – to market Fifer's creations. While Practical had a new love, her garden; to dig, plant, and keep her grounded.

Ten months later, the three little pigs were sitting by the wood-burning fireplace, raising a glass to the publication of Fifer's new book. There was a knock on the door, because The Big Bad Wolf always knocks from time to time.

"Little pig, little pig, let me come in!"

"Not on the hair of our chinny-chin-chins!"

"Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in."

And he huffed, and he puffed, and he huffed, and he puffed, but he could not blow the house in.

Fifer and Fiddler squealed with relief, until they heard a rustle in the grape vine at the side of the house. Practical stayed calm when she heard the wolf climb onto the roof – the tiles had been checked and fixed. There was no concern when the wolf reached the newly pointed chimney. She didn't fret at the sound of claws clinging to the flue. She simply stood up and stoked the fire.

The wolf howled and was last seen running towards the water as fast as his long legs would carry him.

And the three little pigs lived happily ever after. ■

NON-FICTION: HONOURABLE MENTION

Judge's comments: *This poignant Life Story pulls us into the final hours of an ill-fated British WWII bomber and her boisterous, boyish crew, brought to life again in engaging dialogue and touching humanity. Heading through the dark and dangerous skies on a "wing and a prayer," we are reminded of the courage and sacrifices made by what historians are calling, The Greatest Generation.*

Shot Down WWII August 11, 1941 Barb Reardon

"This war will be over before I get to the front lines," my father said. "I'll be out of here in time for tea. Trust me, Mother, nothing will ever happen to me!"

Herb was a young man, twenty-two, when he first joined the war effort in 1941 as a bomb aimer for the Royal Air Force. Like many men his age, he felt invincible. He was young, and athletic with nerves of steel, and great eyesight. This was why he had been chosen by the recruiters for this prestigious division. To Herb, joining seemed like the right thing to do. The sirens sounded that evening of August 11, 1941, at the RAF base in Southern England.

"Wake up, get dressed, gear up and meet outside your planes immediately," the voice over the loudspeaker commanded. The six men commandeering their bombers quickly responded. The Handley Page Halifax aircraft was a four-engine heavy bomber, which was used for the ongoing night bombings over Mainz, Germany, roughly two-and-a-half hours away. This was a large city in Germany occupied by the French that Hitler had taken over and "cleansed" of Jews in 1933.

"Come on boys let's get going," Herb said, raring to go. This was Herb's sixth week working the air strikes and all the recruits felt that the boys on board their Halifax's were really making a difference in the war effort.

"Are checks completed for all six stations and ready to go?" asked the pilot.

There were six assorted crew members on board each aircraft. Joe, the pilot, an Englishman and the oldest at twenty-three, had trained in small planes and recently obtained his full flying licence. Billy, his co-pilot and engineer, was also an Englishman at only nineteen who had just started his training in flying. Mate was the rear gunner, an enthusiastic Australian also nineteen. He called everyone "mate" and soon the name stuck. He held the most dangerous position on board the plane due to exchange of gun fire coming mainly from behind. Rusty was the mid-gunner, a crusty Welshman, the youngest on board at only eighteen years of age. Ben was the navigator who was responsible for keeping the course to and from Germany, an Australian sheep farmer at twenty-one years of age. My father Herb was the sole Canadian, a bomb aimer and wireless operator. He was a free spirit and an orchardist back home in Western Canada.

"Checks confirmed from all the lads," Billy said to Joe.

Ben the navigator, located below the pilots confirmed all was a go in their area. He and Herb were nestled in the nose area of the plane; they had the vision and steady hands to push the buttons. Each position was interchangeable in case of loss of life. They chatted casually amongst themselves on their radios as the gunners were not stationed that close to the rest and waited their turn to take off.

“I wonder how many bloody Krauts we can take out tonight. Last time we downed two planes,” Rusty said.

“I hope it’s not too overcast in Mainz later, and not the continual drizzle like it is here today in England. It can be so difficult to see and line up the targets,” said Herb.

“Well I don’t know about you, Herb, but being your pilot and having all your lives in my hands, I hope for fog, so we can hide until we come right to our target and then see the flares dropped by our Mosquitoes, just drop our bombs and off we go!”

Mate laughed. “Funny, how the bomb aimer wants it be clear, so he can get accurate targets hits, and the pilot wants fog to hide in, arriving and escaping undetected. No one is ever happy!”

They all had a good chuckle over that. The pilot called back to the boys sitting on hold in mid plane, “Does everyone know the ‘Three Cardinal Principles’ of flying a bomber?”

“No,” Rusty responded.

“Well, Rusty, since you are the youngest I’m glad you asked,” Joe said. “Beware of the Hun in the sun. Always keep in formation. Never let the Hun get above you.”

“What’s a Hun?” Rusty asked.

“A derogative nickname, for German brutality in this war. They flew behind you in the sun’s rays to hide in your blind spots, like driving a car. They can easily bring down your plane. The enemy can get quite close in before you actually see them coming,” Joe replied.

“Good thing I’m not your pilot, I don’t even know how to drive,” said Rusty.

Ben, now sitting in the mid section of the plane, reached for the warm thermos of tea he brought along with him. After pouring himself some tea he passed around the thermos for the rest to warm up with.

“Anyone wants a cuppa, it’s freezing on board these bloody planes,” he said.

“Of course we do,” they replied in unison.

The bite of freezing temperatures due to lack of insulation and breezy interiors made for frozen hands. This mission was taking four hundred planes up to blitz the city of Mainz.

“We’ve a fair amount of time until we cross the German border, and then onto our target. Thank God the plane is running well, as you never know what you’d get to fly after the maintenance check is done or if one gets done at all. With so many planes destroyed or damaged it’s a wonder how the mechanics are able to keep up.”

“What we need here is a bunch of female mechanics doing all that work so that we boys going out to bomb can come home to a pretty face,” Mate joked.

They all laughed and agreed that would be fantastic! Billy, the co-pilot, asked if any of them had a lucky charm as he always wore a gold cross given to him by his girlfriend. Mate, of course, always had his ‘roos toe’ to remind him of Australia.

“I guess these sheepskin jackets are my lucky charm since I am a sheep farmer,” said Ben.

“I’ve always got Violet, my Lovely’s, picture, in a metal case hung over my heart in case I get shot at, as she will save my life,” said Joe.

“Well I have my girl Gwen in my breast pocket. It’s a good idea to put it in a metal case,” Herb said.

“Not me,” said Rusty, “you’re all mad. I don’t believe in all that voo-doo stuff. Besides, I don’t have to dodge all those bullets like you lot, as I’m so skinny they will never hit me!”

As the plane’s engine droned on, they passed over the German border. The co-pilot ordered all the men to return to their stations and check out their parachutes. Some had them clipped right onto the front of their suits. The bomb aimer, the rear gunner in such close quarters, and the pilot sitting on his, were at a disadvantage. Through the windows of the other planes in formation, salutes were received and given. The plane’s radio was quiet except some chatter from other pilots. Everyone tucked into their seats and set up for the arrival of Mainz. All of a sudden, Herb’s heart beat began to pump faster, and he no longer felt the cold.

“I can see the city lights coming into view,” he said.

Many of their allied planes were now gathering around them as their targets drew nearer. Still waiting until formation was completed, everyone’s temperature rose. Foreheads formed sweat despite the below zero weather, as nerves started to spike up. The pilot noticed the plane in front dropped its bomb too early.

“Jesus Christ, look at what that son of a bitch just did. He’s dropped his bomb and clipped the wings of one of our own planes just in front of us.”

“Oh my God” gasped the co-pilot. “I knew this would happen one day with so many of us flying so close together in formation. I don’t think they even know what’s happened to them yet!”

Everyone held their breath as they watched. Luckily, it hadn’t detonated. The unfortunate plane was having problems getting into line. Someone radioed the pilot to let him know, and realizing the dilemma, he was able to correct and get back into formation. Many more bombs could be heard already dropping up ahead of them now. They were soon brought back to the job on hand.

The pilot yelled, “Man your stations, now!”

Herb fingers were shaking, and he hoped it didn’t affect his target. Ben, navigating his schematic, told Herb that they were very close. Herb confirmed he had his target in sight. As a bomb aimer, he then took control of the aircraft when it was on a bombing mission. He had to lie flat in the nose of the aircraft directing the pilot until the bombs were released, at which time a photograph was taken as proof of the operation.

“Joe, can you lower the elevation?” Herb asked. “A little to the right, now left, lower, lower, great.” With his hands still shaking from the previous drama, he was able to push the button and away went the bomb. A few seconds later they heard the explosion.

“I think you hit the mark, Herb, or damn close,” Matt bragged.

They all cheered. Then out of nowhere they were being fired upon. They’d lost their concentration during the event and now they were the target. Both gunners were right on it and started shooting back as quickly as

possible. Together they returned fire at anything that came their way. Ben had the sole gun and was firing. No one knew what they were shooting at, the Germans, or themselves. Sweat started to flow into Herb's eyes and his view was blurring. He wiped at his brow with the back of his hand while working the wireless.

Suddenly, the pilot yelled, "We've been hit!"

The belly of the plane was on fire and the plane veered over to the left, while the pilot tried to control it. The noise was deafening now, smoke enveloped the cockpit. Herb, Ben, and Rusty were coughing while the order to "Gear up and prepare to jump," was called out. They all wiggled from their stations to prepare the chutes. Meanwhile the co-pilot was radioing, "Mayday! Mayday! We're going down, prepare to jump."

As the pilot tried to control the plane there was little hope left as the right engine was on fire now. Mate spun around in his rear turret, opened his hatch and was out. Rusty had gone through the central hatch. Herb was on the wireless telling of their location and then he and Ben opened theirs and bailed out.

Herb listened to the sound of wind rushing by as smoke still filled the air. Shots were whizzing around, and he counted four parachutes out of the plane, but where were the pilots? He finally saw one more leave the craft but now the plane spiralled downwards. He knew about the warnings, that the spin was the hardest to parachute out of, as the plane, fell towards the ground. The fifth parachute, where is the fifth one? The plane finally hit the ground exploding into flames. Herb wondered who didn't make it out. Jesus Christ, he thought, it must have been the pilot as he was the last man left. Please, God, let them all get out alive. What was to happen with them now? This was not something Herb had expected so soon after only six weeks on missions. This could not be the end!

As he closed in on the ground, Herb noticed how dark it was. No one else seemed to be close by. He could hear sirens in the distance and it was still smoky. There were other planes being hit but he didn't know if they were the enemy or their own. He must have landed a mile from the crash site. Herb seemed to be in a forest, luckily for him. He buried his chute and sat down by a hollow near a tree to catch his breath and read his maps.

Then everything went black. ■

POETRY: FIRST PLACE

Judge's Comments: *This poem takes a subject of local and universal importance, the disappearance and probable death of those we love, and the agony of not knowing what has become them. It entirely succeeds in personalizing the experience of loss through original, compelling imagery and a dramatic presentation of a single example that ends with very poignant concluding lines.*

Woman Gone *Chelsea Comeau*

Your sister's face fixed to streetlights with packing tape,
her hair pulled tightly into a ponytail behind her.
When you join the march downtown,
it's the same picture glued to your poster board sign,
her name beneath it written with a grape-scented marker.
The woman beside you is here from Winnipeg,
the last number her daughter called from a six-oh-four.
She lingers at your poster the way one grief
is a grey moth drawn to the light of another.
What your sister's picture doesn't show
is the pair of boots she borrowed from your closet,
her rucksack filled with tampons and pot, slung over one shoulder
while she strode, deer-limbed, across the lawn into the uncertain night.
How you measure your memories of her in lasts:
that last glimpse, her body climbing out the window
to follow a heart that was already gone,
the last thing she said to you over the pay phone outside the Ivanhoe.
How long the mouthpiece might have held her warmth.
Weeks after she left, your mother sold her dresses in the driveway
at the yard sale, the green one, knee length, patterned with birds, the blue one.
They swayed like ghosts on wire hangers, hung empty without bones to fill them.

POETRY: SECOND PLACE

Judge's Comments: *Very finely crafted, with images drawn widely from science and Greek tragedy, this poem very movingly dramatizes the experience of betrayal, and the impossibility of mending its consequences, even as one yearns to do so.*

The Lie
Martha Warren

Moving the earth with seismic force,
His lie makes what once were certainties,
Fluid and unpredictable:
A tidal wave might appear out of nowhere without warning;
A spring might rise up from cracked, dry ground where least expected,
Reducing the marriage to vibrating particles of matter.

Atoms darting rapidly,
Electrons charged with deceit,
In this physical chaos, she searches for that one steady hand,
A deus ex machina,
To pull her firmly, strongly, with conviction,
And against all scientific probability,
Out of the laws of physics, back into
The steady, visceral world of honesty, integrity, and white knights.

POETRY: THIRD PLACE

Judge's Comments: *This poem is a triumph of voice. The subject, an aging woman's awareness of her fading allure as she yearns to recapture a lost love, could well have descended into triteness. It succeeds because the character of the speaker is brought through with complete authenticity.*

Of A Certain Age *Trish Gauntlett*

Laid back out walking in the wind and rain
with hair all wild and make-up gone
don't care who sees me, who sees me this way
he turns and something in the angle of his cheek reminds my heart of you
what if he had been you?
look at me, lines uncovered, too much grey
exposed
why didn't I, why don't I every morning
dress as if we might meet accidentally somewhere?
on the seawall, by the bridge, in the mall
why don't I pour the perfume on
and cover lines and grey with surface colour
wear my six-inch heels and clean sophisticated suits
and look more polished, more together,
younger than I ever was when we were lovers?
then if the tilted cheek is yours as it has never been since that last day,
I will be glorious
repaired, recovered, reinvented
and you will never see the woman wild and old
who does not earn a second glance.

YOUTH: FIRST PLACE

Judge's Comments: *Alternate universe where horses are persecuted by extremist anti-horse missionaries; set against a futuristic neo-classical civilization. Self-referential touches made me laugh, with excellent use of irony, black humour and sly satire of the politics of extremism.*

Sherbert's Last Stand *Ross Manara*

Harsh winds blew through the Plains of Ascension by the Glades of Summoning as Raymond the Horse put the finishing touches on his diorama.

"Finally!" cackled the happy horse. "I have created the ultimate piece of art, proving once and for all horses have immortal souls! This is a proud moment for all of horse-kind! Sherbert, come here!" Sherbert, Raymond's niece, trotted over to the diorama. Ever since her parents were murdered by the Nelsonites, a cult of radical horse-cullers during the great Equine Purge of '13, Raymond had raised her and hidden her from cultists.

However, despite his living in hiding, Raymond was not so cowed as to give up on the age-old dream of horse independence. He was more than aware that if the world continued to be this way there would soon be no horses to enjoy its green fields and succulent hay. So, when Raymond discovered art - and the fact that, if a creature can create it, said animal would have proved it had an eternal soul - he realised he had the opportunity to make a difference in the world.

"Wow," said Sherbert, "I sure love all those flowers and all that succulent hay in the background." Raymond beamed, proud of his diorama, which showed a world where Horses and Humanity lived in peace and Abraham Lincoln was still alive (it was admittedly a little better than his first diorama where he crafted a world where horses ruled a totalitarian society that hunted godless humans to extinction and Abraham Lincoln wasn't alive (for obvious reasons). He had gout (it was a very bad case of gout).

"Yes, yes, the flowers and succulent hay are nice," said Raymond, "but what do you think about humans and horses living in peace?" he continued, while fiddling with Lincoln's little plastic top hat. "Don't you want to live in that world?" Sherbert thought long and hard (for a horse) for almost four seconds.

"No," she said, and went back to chewing cud in the shade.

It was then she heard the gunshots.

Sherbert looked up just in time to see Raymond's warm carcass fall onto his newly-made diorama. She cried out in fear, eyes searching for where the gunshots had come from, and spotted three Nelsonic missionaries hurrying quickly across the plains.

When they arrived they immediately set Raymond's corpse on fire, which burned the already crumpled diorama. Sherbert hid deeper in the underbrush and watched in silent horror as they knelt before Raymond's splayed body and began to pray in hushed voices.

“In the honour of our holy Lord Nelson we three hunters do pledge this body of meat to his Lordship and all things pure, and ask for nothing in return but to feel his good graces and witness the vile hoofed menace burn in everlasting flames”

“Amen” said the first hunter-missionary.

“Amen” said the second hunter-missionary.

“Amen” said the third hunter-missionary, still whispering as he had forgotten to turn off italics, unlike his two friends.

Sherbert stood there, confused, afraid, but mainly confused because she couldn't understand English.

Just then, the first hunter-missionary looked up and spotted her.

“Lord Nelson has blessed us with the opportunity to honour him twice today” he shouted, taking aim. Sherbert, sensing the danger, ran deeper into the glade and disappeared.

“Damn,” said the first hunter-missionary who was immediately shot by his cohorts for blasphemy.

Sherbert ran faster than she ever had, knowing that her life depended on this. It all turned out to be a wasted effort, as directly after the hunter-missionaries killed their friend they killed each other for committing the mortal sin of taking another person's life.

As Sherbert surged further into the Glades she couldn't help but notice the piles of skeletal remains of what once were stallions. They carpeted the forest's floor, likely the collateral damage of ancient summoning spells.

By the time she stopped running she was hopelessly lost. Despite calming down from the murder of her uncle and the “chase” she was still lost and surrounded by bones - so Sherbert was absolutely terrified when she arrived in the forest clearing.

A golden twilight broke through the branches and shone on the mysterious dais that lay in the center of the clearing. Sherbert looked up at the ancient throne and was amazed by its fascinating design and finish. Being just a simple horse there was no way she could recognize the design, nor comprehend the sheer amount of time it had rested in that clearing. Had they known about Sherbert's find, curators at the Imperial Rabbin Museum would have been shocked and angered, calling this sentence “a complete waste of time” and “unnecessary to furthering the plot”.

Of course, none of those curators had ever created an extended universe, so their impoliteness would have been forgiven. However, had they been in the clearing and had they inspected the carvings and intricate spells, they would have realised that this chair had existed long before the great Rabbin Empire and the petty kingdoms of old.

This chair had once sat in the throne rooms of Titans, living (well, if you call it that) deities who bent the laws of reality to their will. The Titans had disappeared millennia ago, but an item so closely tied to them held unimaginable power.

There was no way a horse could know this, and no way a horse could know that sorcerers had used this monument of power to summon spirits from the aether for hundreds of years. There was also no way the Horse could have known that the Sorcerers, later slaughtered by Nelsonic warrior-monks, had left a portal open during one final spell that had been cut off too early.

The horse may not have known about the dais' peculiar history, but she did know that the gaping wormhole that appeared in front of her and spewed forth a glowing white mare was probably not natural. Sherbert stared in fear at the mare floating in front of her. Its eyes glowed the light blue essence that all beings from beyond the veil excreted.

“Hello?” Sherbert stammered “Who are y–”

“SILENCE MY CHILD” boomed a voice. It didn't come from the mare's mouth, which had remained clenched in a grimace for this entire time, rather the voice seemed to echo from all directions in the forest.

“IT IS NOT COINCIDENCE THAT BRINGS US TOGETHER, BUT FATE.”

“W-w-who are you?” repeated Sherbert, cautiously.

“I AM THE HONORABLE LORD NELSON, FOREST SPIRIT AND FIRST NELSONIC PROPHET”.

Sherbert thought for a few seconds before saying “Don't Nelsonites kill horses?”.

The voice boomed, “MY WORDS SPOKEN IN OLD TIMES WERE MISCONSTRUED AND BASTARDISED BY THOSE OF FALSE FAITH,” Lord Nelson continued “YOU, SHERBERT...” Sherbert froze. Somehow the spirit knew her name. “WILL NOT AVENGE THE DEATHS OF YOUR MOTHER, FATHER AND UNCLE. BUT YOU CAN PREVENT MORE BRUTAL SLAYINGS.” Lord Nelson coughed awkwardly. “YOU MUST PROVE TO THE HUMANS THAT HORSES HAVE SOULS. REPAIR YOUR UNCLE'S DIORAMA AND SHOW THEM A PATH TO A BETTER WORLD”. Lord Nelson floated back into the portal and vanished into the aether.

Sherbert felt a warm feeling. She looked down, and sure enough it wasn't pee. It was determination.

Sherbert galloped back to the Plains of Ascension and picked up the burned and crumpled diorama. Painstakingly, she used tree bark, grass, and a plastic Abraham Lincoln figurine she found in the forest to repair the diorama, but at the end of her labours, she realised with horror that she was missing the most important ingredient in building a diorama – glue.

Sherbert knew that without glue the whole diorama would be a bust, and more humans would just try to kill her. Luckily for her, though, Sherbert had a plan.

She cantered across the plains, avoiding settlements and daemons. She reached the Temporal Sands and continued onwards through the searing heat. Sherbert trudged through the ruins of civilizations long past, and only when she reached the mountains of South Rabbid did she rest.

One Tuesday - though in actuality it could have been any day, the Temporal Plains did that to people - Sherbert reached her destination. On the peak of Mount Pandrauss she stared down into the Lylation Valley. She didn't look at the small farming settlements, or the massive ribcages some said were left behind by the Titans themselves. No, Sherbert looked directly down the mountain at the Lyla Imperial Glue Factory.

She clenched the diorama parts tight between her teeth and charged down the mountainside, picking up speed. She closed her eyes, seeing Uncle Raymond in her mind's eye and imagining her parents who were killed well before she was born.

“Wait a minute, how does that work?” thought Sherbert as she barreled down on the facility.

“If they died before I was born then wouldn't I –” Sherbert's head collided with the Glue Factory. For reference, the factory was made of reinforced concrete, and Sherbert's head was made of, well, horse meat. She died instantly.

Lord-Mayor Idris of Lyla was having a bad day. First, he woke up with that lizard telling him to hurt others again, then he found out his father had been absorbed by a daemon up north, and now the broadsheets were reporting on an “Equine terrorist attack.” Apparently, some foolish horse had decided to charge the glue facility - a damn shame considering how few of them there were left in the wild. Judging by the pieces of cardboard and plastic found next to the horse corpse - which the papers called an “incomplete bomb” - the horse was yet another in a long line of poor souls just trying to demonstrate that they had, well, souls.

Nevertheless, Nelsonite radicals (and the Rabbin High Command) were calling for punishment, and who was Idris not to oblige? The radicals were the same people who voted for him each June. The last horses in Lyla were being rounded up and turned to glue as he walked towards his desk. The remaining horse stock in the surrounding lands would be captured and slaughtered by the other nation-states in the weeks to follow. The denizens of Rabbin were all equally rabid in their hatred of horses and their worship of Lord Nelson.

Idris wondered briefly what would happen afterwards, without a common enemy. The governments of old were slow-moving and antiquated. Without horses, would his people turn on each other? Would he turn on the High Command? He chuckled to himself, looking at the plastic figure of Abraham Lincoln collected from the “bomb”.

Change was coming. Who would weather the storm? ■

YOUTH: SECOND PLACE

Judge's comments: *Epistolary historical view from the P.O.V. of a Chinese migrant worker on the Canadian railroad.*

The Golden Mountains ***Arshia Sorourian***

Date: 1882, Jun 13

Place: British Columbia - The Golden Mountain

Dear Mother,

I was boarding a ferry bound to British Columbia, I was going to the golden mountains to earn money by building the railway, so my grandfather can pay off his gambling debts, so he can earn back his store. I am writing in this journal because my teacher said that if you do it people would stop calling you rock brain, which I hated because Ba calls me it, now everybody calls me it. I am starting to get bored to death. The sea is the same everywhere and lots of men including me are getting seasick which means there is the smell of vomit is everywhere. We finally got there after what felt like an eternity. It was green with trees so high you couldn't see the top. We were told to cut down the trees to make way for the railway, there was this company man that kept our records, we called him bookman. We started cutting down trees the next day, it was very hard because the trees were so thick. Many of my coworkers and friends had accidents with the equipment and one of them died. One of my friend's fingers were crushed the other ones got hit by a flying axe head which proved devastating. My hands were sweating and bleeding, it was painful and tiring work. We had cut down many trees, even the super big ones which took long to cut down. We were not having any fun and the pay isn't that good at all, it's terrible! They give you only one coin a day which can pay you 25 kilos of rice but nothing else, they will also cut your pay to 60 cents a day if you do shopping at a non-company store, they also only give 50 cents on travelling days and cheat us and don't give our wages. In one month I only earned 13 instead of 30. My body, shoulders, and arms hurt and sleeping on rocks don't help at all. My friend went outside to squat and he came back with his chest open with blood spilling out of it we rushed to save him but there was nothing we could do. He told us that a big black animal that he wasn't sure of jumped up and attacked him. We assumed it was a very big bear. Soon he died and there was nothing we could do about it. The gold mountains are a beautiful, green amazing place, it's just we never get a chance to see it since were forced to work all day long till we either die or the lucky ones survive. I hope to get out as soon as I can.

Sincerely,

Lee Heen-gwong

YOUTH: THIRD PLACE

Judge's comments: *Blackly humorous story of the death of a pet fish and the relationship between two sisters.*

Bye Bye Rosie

Lucy Whitmore

I have never liked hairbrushes less than when one killed Rosie—and with it, my acting career. It had been the start of something amazing. Rosie and I would have been successful, and now it was over.

It was my older sister Laura who dropped my hairbrush into the bowl—from two stories up. Rosie had been placed underneath the laundry chute, in her “break room” where she lived when the camera wasn’t rolling. I found her entangled in the hairbrush’s bristles, her white scales gleaming. My screams could be heard across town.

“Rosie was a special fish,” began my speech at her funeral, “not only because she was albino, but because we had a connection. I know she was proud of our accomplishments, and of our casting in the Morning News Quirky Pets Segment. And now this marvel, this gift of a fish, is gone.”

I hadn’t talked to Laura since the Great Horror. I had gained a sneaking suspicion that the hairbrush-dropping was not an accident.

And then it hit me.

Laura was jealous. One time, when our sketch was on TV. Laura said “Oh, cool.” It doesn’t take a genius to work out the thinly-veiled layers of jealousy. She was just itching to replace Rosie and me, and ready to do whatever it took to destroy our careers, including killing Alabaster County’s only albino goldfish.

When I emailed her to tell her she wasn’t invited to Rosie’s funeral, Laura responded with “K.” Clearly she did not feel “K”!

“When will the lies end?” I howled at her from two stories below her bedroom.

Late one night—dark like the night the Great Horror happened—I went into Laura’s room. She was probably dreaming about perpetrating more nefarious deeds.

It was after I entered the room, paintbrush in hand, that I remembered that without light, I couldn’t see. My revenge would fail, and I would be left to defend myself against a ruthless fish-murderer. There was no point in trying to paint “I KNOW WHAT YOU DID...hint: fish” on her favourite hoodie. It would surely turn into a worse mess than that time I tried to follow a Bob Ross painting tutorial. There would be zero happy little trees here.

Disheartened, I turned to exit the room, when I heard Laura move. With a voice that seemed a little too clear for a sleeping person, she said “Sorry Rosie... I didn’t mean to...”

Maybe Laura knew I was there or maybe she didn’t actually murder Rosie in cold blood. Regardless, I swiped the paintbrush full of white paint across her forehead and left before I could see her reaction.

I still only communicate with her via email. ■

YOUTH: HONOURABLE MENTION

Judge's comments: *A poetic view of all the ways one can poison a friendship.*

Witch's Brew
Laura Marr

Witch's brew oh, witch's brew, what will I put in my stew?
The piercing pain of a dart? The sadness of a broken heart?
Oh no, my intentions need something more sinister to cook.

So read on, and take a look.

First in the pot is gobs of gossip from a grotesque goblin, yes that's smart.

Gossip can crush one's spirit, and crack an innocent heart.

Next is vicious vanity that can destroy even the prettiest of faces.

People "gasp" and stare at them. Everybody chases.

A pair of bystander's eyes plunges into my potion next.

The eyes are watching. Watching a girl being attacked and screaming for help.

But the eyes close, and do not move.

I now pour in runny rancid rumors that follow you; a stench you cannot scrub off.

It follows you like a sneaky, slender, smiling stalking snake,
around every corner around every loop.

"Ah Ha!" I say, "Perfect for my soup."

Now it is time for buckets of bitchy betrayal,
its mist rises from my cauldron and curls like old brittle fingers.
And now my potion is finally done. I'll give it to you on a lend.

Here's its name, listen closely.

It's the perfect potion to lose a friend.

EXECUTIVE: 2017-2018

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Not currently filled

Vice-President (and Director)
Rod Baker

Secretary (and Director)
Not currently filled

Treasurer/Member Relations (and Director)
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Kelly Hoskins

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Carl Hunter

North Shore Writers Festival Liaison
Cathy Scrimshaw

*Many thanks to all our volunteers for their
dedication and hard work!*

Event Calendar

June 18 ***NSWA 25th Anniversary Celebration
at The Silk Purse***

August 31 ***Fall newsletter deadline***

Summer Break

Sept 17 ***NSWA AGM and Election***

Oct 15 ***General Meeting***

Nov ***Christmas in November, date and
details TBD***

And finally...

“Winning isn't everything--but wanting to win is.”
– **Vince Lombardi Jr.**

“You rarely win, but sometimes you do.”
– **Harper Lee**

“You're not obligated to win. You're obligated to keep
trying. To the best you can do every day.”
– **Jason Mraz**

 **City Library**

The North Shore Writers' Association thanks the North Vancouver City Library for their generous support of our ongoing activities and special events, and also for their support of all local writers and readers. The Library plays an active and varied role in the cultural life of our community - for more information and to find out how to participate, go to: www.nvcl.ca