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NSWA website
for info and updates:
www.nswriters.org

Write On!

The Winning Issue

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

A Message from the Contest Committee Chair

Doug MacLeod

The annual NSWA Writing Contest has grown steadily in recent years and the 25th annual competition was no exception.

There were sixty-four entries from fifty-one writers. In addition to the usual entries from the Lower Mainland, we received submissions from several corners of British Columbia and one came all the way from Ontario. Once again, we were pleased to see young writers participate and hope their numbers increase in the future.

Several people need to be thanked for their contribution to the 2021 contest: Kelly Hoskins for promotion, Mark Turris for poster design, Chris Cowan and Barb Reardon for collating submissions and contacting winners, and Wiley Ho for producing this Winning Edition of *Write On*.

COVID restrictions forced us to change the awards ceremony from a live event at the North Shore Writers Festival to a streamed presentation, available on the festival website. This

forced adaptation produced a delightful result with all three judges available to present the awards in their categories during the virtual ceremony. The quality of the judging was remarkable. We thank Stephanie Maricevic (poetry), Jackie Bateman (fiction), and Bill Arnott (non-fiction) for their thoughtfulness and care.

View the Awards Ceremony at:
<https://youtu.be/7LIGHbYRTAU>

You will enjoy reading these poems and stories. They were written by writers like you. Make plans to submit a piece of your own work next year. ■

Congratulations to everyone who submitted and shared their writing!



Photo: Wendy Alden



***North Shore Writers' Association
25th Annual Writing Contest Winners***

Fiction

First Place: Christine Langlois for *Playing for Time*
Second Place: D.K. Eve for *Neighbourhood Watch*
Third Place: Laurie Crookell for *Shadow**
Honourable Mention: Doug MacLeod for *The Comedian*

Non-Fiction

First Place: Wendy Bone for *The Lonely Sea*
Second Place: Wendy Alden for *Loving Liberace*
Third Place: Angela Douglas for *Crossing the Sacred Valley*
Honourable Mentions: Rod Baker for *The Last Voyage of the Solander*
Diane Maguire for *The Scar on my Throat*

Poetry

First Place: Janet Kvammen for *Waiting For Their Light*
Second Place: Christine Cowan for *My Cat Watched Us*
Third Place: Alexander Hamilton-Brown for *Milkweed Birds*
Honourable Mentions: Rod Baker for *Boy Learns to March*
Marilyn Bittman for *Powell Street Woman*
Jennifer Burton for *Zoom Meeting*

Youth

Winner: Anita Movazzafi for *The Caspian Tiger*

** The author has requested not to publish their work at this time.*



Fiction



First Place

Playing for Time *Christine Langlois*

As she pressed through the mass of pedestrians on the dark sidewalk, she could hear the thump of a bass and the chatter of a snare drum. Her ears filtered out the city blare to register the skill of the playing. The drummer had a cool proficiency and a tight handle on his kit for a street musician. As always, she wondered how someone with that kind of talent could end up playing for loonies outside a shopping mall in the January cold.

She was headed for the Eaton Centre food court and a coffee. After a long week, she couldn't face the crowded subway just yet. Her mind skittered back to the office and the project she needed to have done for Monday. She did a mental check that she'd remembered to bring home the right documents.

The lone drummer's sticks must be flying. She hadn't spotted him yet through the crowd but she could hear the wild flourishes as he reached the crescendo of his drum solo. As the solo slowly petered out, she listened for clapping but could only hear the noise of the traffic.

In another lifetime, when she'd been the singer in a band, she'd loved whipping up the crowd for a drum solo. "Let's hear it for the drummer! You don't get to hear playing like that every night! Let's hear it, folks!"

Finally, she got close enough to catch sight of the man. He'd stopped playing and sat hunched on his stool in a fake leather jacket with his long grey hair hanging over his face and his hands between his thighs for warmth. Beside him stood a metal grocery cart strung with bungee cords and filled with blankets and a plastic bag.

When she got alongside so that she could see his face, she realized that she recognized him. She couldn't recall his name but she was sure he had played drums for her and Lenny's band back in the day. She remembered he'd grown up in Peterborough. Lenny had hired him because the man had said he'd played with the Hawk.

She edged closer. The man's name didn't surface but other memories did. A bar fight in Timmins that he and their guitar player had jumped into, after which Lenny had invited everyone back to their one

motel room. The long hours that the three men had practiced in the back of the van while she drove because, as Lenny would tell her, “you can sing and drive, can’t ya?”

The drummer picked up his sticks and idly began a slow rhythmic beat on closed cymbals. At first, he seemed to be playing more to keep warm than to engage the passersby. He added the bass. But, as he played, his expression grew animated and his eyes sought out connection with passing faces. He had a brazen energy that demanded attention although no one seemed to notice. Now he was looking straight at her. She froze. Should she smile? Would he recognize her? Before she could decide, his eyes flicked away. He had no expectations of a stolid woman in a bulky winter coat with her hood up and sensible boots on her feet.

She stood there a long time watching him play and letting their brief conjoined past roll by. Then she decided – what the hell – she’d speak to him. She forced her feet to move ahead until she was standing right in front of him, blocking his view. She dropped two loonies into the Tim Hortons cup that he’d attached to the cymbal stand with duct tape. As he kept playing, he gave her a professional thank-you smile without any sign of recognition. Then, from her closer vantage point, she saw something flicker across his eyes – an over-bright glitter, a chemical edge – that explained the intensity of his performance. She remembered that in every town they played, he’d always managed to score something for the after-party.

She waited until he stopped playing. She caught his eye and smiled at him. “Hi, I’m Irene Nadoroskwa – used to call myself Renie Naylor. I think we played together back in ‘90s. I was the singer with The Black Birds.”

It took a few seconds and then he exploded with recognition. A huge smile creased his face, his eyes sparkled and she could see the man-boy she’d known. “Right on, Renie! Right on! Great to see you, girl. I didn’t catch it was you in that conservative attire,” he said with what felt like kindness. “Do you see any of the old guys from the band? Does Lenny still play? I’ve been thinking about looking them up and seeing if they needed a drummer. Man, those were good times!” Finally, he ran out of steam and it was her turn to keep the conversation afloat.

“No, Lenny and I parted ways years ago,” she said. “I did see Paul, the bass player, at a fundraiser that a girlfriend dragged me to. It was at the Hard Rock Cafe for some old rocker with cancer. Did you go to that?” As soon as she asked, she regretted it. Maybe someone had had a fundraiser for him.

“Nah. I mustn’t have been in town,” he said. “I still travel a bit.”

Although she didn’t say anything, she wondered where he could go with his cart and his kit. Her scepticism must have shown on her face because his own face hardened. He became the performer again and dared her to do the same.

“Hey, how about a song, Renie? You gotta sing a song with me for old time’s sake.”

“No, no! I couldn’t. I don’t sing anymore.”

“Of course you sing, girl. A voice like that doesn’t just stop!” He sat back on his drum stool and picked up his sticks. Then he flicked on the karaoke machine beside him – she hadn’t noticed it there. He began fiddling with the dials and the opening chords of Alannah Myles’ “Black Velvet” filled the sidewalk. She was impressed that he’d remembered. The Black Birds had always closed with that song.

When he tossed her a mike on a long wire, she had no choice but to catch it or let it drop. Jack – that was his name! – smoothly joined in with the steady bass and snare combination. Then he nodded her cue and she shocked herself by starting to sing.

“Mississippi in the middle of a dry spell. Jimmy Rogers on the Victrola up high.” Even though her first few notes were wobbly and flat, the words flowed back seamlessly. On the third line, she’d adjusted and was in tune. By the first chorus, she forgot where she was or that one of her co-workers might happen by. She sang.

As a young woman, she had tried so hard to please by exuding the same high-energy sexuality as her idol. She’d watched the music video hundreds of times, bought a black leather jacket and perfected Myles’ wide-legged swagger on the stage.

Now, as she stood motionless except for the inevitable weave and bob of her head, what she heard in the words she was singing was not the heat but the longing. The longing to be heard.

“Every word of every song that he sang was for you. In a flash he was gone...”

Her last show with the Black Birds had been at the Sudbury arena. Afterwards at the bar, Lenny had berated her for some misstep on stage and pronounced their relationship over. “You don’t have it,” he’d shouted. The betrayal and disappointment and loss that she felt that night as she rode the midnight bus back to Toronto had silenced her – until now.

“Black velvet, if you please!” She held the last note. Then Jack did his final drum flourish and it was over.

A middle-aged couple in matching sheepskin coats clapped firmly and then the man walked over and dropped a five-dollar bill in the paper cup.

“You two are good. You should try playing an inside venue,” he said earnestly.

She burst out laughing and then Jack started in. The more they laughed, the more hysterical they got. Jack had an excuse – he was high – but, sober, Irene hadn’t laughed like that for years. Finally she caught her breath.

“Oh God, that was crazy,” she said. She passed the mike back. “Really good to see you, Jack. I have to get my train. But lovely to run into you and thanks for asking me to sing.”

“Any time you want to jam together, you know where to find me,” he said. “You should start singing again, Renie. Take it from me – it’s never too late.” He threw one stick in the air, caught it and started tapping the cymbal.

She was backing away, not wanting to get pinned down to another song or another meeting. Now she’d have to avoid this corner. She wasn’t going to start singing on the street. But singing? Irene would definitely sing again. ■



Fiction



Second Place

Neighbourhood Watch

D. K. Eve

Willamina enjoyed her evening walks with Robbie strolling unnoticed along Quail Crescent, catching glimpses of life through cedar hedges and scrolled-iron gates. She admired the inviting yellow glow of her neighbours' windows across broad expanses of lawn, lingering as Robbie sniffed the grass.

The neighbourhood had changed since she and Alastair moved in thirty years ago. There were newcomers she hadn't met. The couple in the black Tesla, driving past as she came outside in the mornings, lived somewhere near the end of the crescent, up the hill. The young man in the older blue car, with his thumping bass music that reverberated through the neighbourhood, had arrived more recently, although she hadn't heard his music in the last few days. When Alastair was alive, they enjoyed soaking the sun on their front porch on warm summer evenings, sipping gin and tonics from frosted glasses. People strolled by and Robbie would erupt in a fit of barking as Willamina and Alastair waved in greeting. Fewer seemed to venture out these days.

Lately Willamina had been socializing on Facebook. She had always been curious, interested in learning and sharing news about events, although Alastair had frowned on what he deemed gossip. Groups like Neighbourhood Watch attracted others like herself, curious to know the details whenever they heard sirens blaring down the highway. Discussions arose if someone posted about a sub par meal in a local restaurant or complained about barking dogs. Willamina was thrilled when others "liked" her comments. Her staunch opinions had also attracted a few anonymous responses warning her to mind her own business. During one heated debate about backyard fires she was delighted when a man posted about his "Quail Crescent neighbourhood" and she quickly agreed that fires were inconsiderate and obnoxious. The writer's profile picture, with fashionable dark stubble and wavy hair, appeared sophisticated. Willamina appreciated his concern about air quality. Perhaps this was the Tesla driver.

Willamina approached the end of the crescent, and Robbie stopped to lift his leg at a rhododendron bush crowning a dark empty driveway. She sniffed at the unpleasant tang of woodsmoke coming from the direction of the house—clearly this wasn't the home of her like-minded neighbour.

She headed back toward her house. The road had a gradual slope and just beyond her driveway it dipped, the edges dropping into a ravine and seasonal creek. Robbie always pulled, interested in exploring the shadowy area above the ravine.

“Let’s go, boy,” she said, nudging the Cairn terrier into the driveway, past the cheery garden gnome Alastair had set there. As they approached the house, a car turned from Pheasant Place. She signalled Robbie to halt, eager to see who it was as they passed, and was surprised when instead it pulled to the side of the road just before her driveway, at the edge of the ravine. The headlights, pale and wavering, glowed like the eyes of a mythical creature in the evening mist that had draped over Quail Crescent concealing details of the car and driver.

“My, my,” Willamina said, hustling Robbie to the house. “Imagination is getting the best of me.” Quail chittered in the bushes drawing Robbie’s attention. She held firmly to the leash, urging him up the driveway, sneaking glances at the car.

The next evening the car appeared again, at the same time as Willamina and Robbie finished their walk. She spied the twin headlight beams through the trees as she waited on the porch with Robbie. The car idled for about ten minutes, then pulled slowly past the driveway. She breathed a deep sigh when it disappeared up the hill. The lone driver was silhouetted by the lights from the house across the street. She thought it might be that young man who was new to the neighbourhood, but the car was eerily quiet.

Later Willamina queried the Facebook group.

[Willamina McKay > Neighbourhood Watch 8:14 pm] A strange car has been parking on our quiet street two nights in a row. What should I do? Should I call someone?

[Comment Karen Labelle 8:16] How frightening! Call the cops.

[Comment Judith Andrews 8:19] Definitely suspicious.

Emboldened by the sympathizers rushing to her side, Willamina imagined herself the defender of the neighbourhood wielding her keyboard like a sabre in the attack against the unknown driver, displaying deft feint and parry against the barrage of responses.

[Comment Fisherman Jim 8:20] Live and let live. (two Likes)

[Reply - Willamina McKay 8:22] What if it was YOUR street? (six Likes)

[Comment Butch Dawg 8:21] This group is nothing but gossip. (two Likes)

[Reply - Willamina McKay 8:26] Feel free to scroll on if you can’t be helpful. I’m a senior and a widow and trying to keep my neighbourhood safe. (five Likes)

Closing her laptop later that night, Willamina relaxed, reassured the car's strange behaviour warranted concern. Could someone be stalking her? As she tucked blankets around her chin, Robbie a warm lump at her feet, she resolved to investigate the next day.

After breakfast, Robbie was anxious to go for his morning walk. Willamina pulled on her raincoat and boots and snapped the leash to Robbie's collar.

"Let's see if we can find out anything about the mysterious car, shall we?" she said, leading Robbie toward Pheasant Place. At the lowest part of the road above the ravine, tire tracks left deep impressions in the soft grass and an oil stain marked the spot where the car had parked.

Robbie, nose down, pulled towards the edge of the ravine.

"Is there something in those blackberry bushes?" Willamina squinted at the shadows in the brambles. The creek below, swollen with early spring rains, frothed into the storm pipe under the road. She noticed a discarded cigarette package and leaned to pick it up for a closer look when a covey of quail broke from the blackberry brambles. Startled, Robbie jerked violently on his leash, pulling Willamina over the lip of the embankment and toppling down into the ravine.

Willamina rolled screaming through the brambles, sharp thorns tearing her hands and face. She still held the leash, dragging Robbie, his eyes bulging as the collar squeezed and finally slipped over his head. She plunged past the blackberries toward the creek, the side of her head smacking a rock at the edge of the water. She lay still, icy water splashing the crown of her head as she slipped from consciousness. Her last thought was that she found the cool water soothing.

* * *

Kamren switched off his music a few blocks before home. That douche-y Tesla guy had come over from next door last week complaining about the noise. It sucked balls to move back to his parent's basement suite. It started out okay. He settled in, spending the days inhaling Slurpees and boosting his scores in *Call of Duty: War Zone*, but soon the whining began. "Can you clean up once in awhile?" was his parents' new mantra. All because of a few empty beer bottles and a pizza box. And hadn't he shown initiative and found a job? Three nights so far washing dishes at the Piggy Burger. He steered his rusted blue Honda Civic onto Quail Crescent and slowed to park on the grassy shoulder above the ravine.

He pulled a tightly rolled cannabis joint from the Altoids tin. "No smoking in this house." Another parental rule. Stopping here had become a ritual. He cranked the driver's side window and looked to the trees leading down into the ravine, breathing in the cool night air, enjoying a brief moment of peace in the quiet neighbourhood. There was the garden gnome at the end of the driveway ahead of him, grinning. Below, the hush of the creek was a comforting melody. He flicked his lighter and leaned back, admiring the cherry red glow as he drew calming smoke to his lungs.

What was that?

He exhaled, listening. There it was again, a low-pitched whimper.

He pushed the car door open and stepped out. Something *scritch scritch* in the gravel behind him. He turned to find a stocky little dog with a whiskery muzzle and pointed ears, wagging its tail.

“Hey, buddy,” Kamren offered his hand. “Where’d you come from?” The dog poked its tongue for a tentative lick. Kamren crouched low, rubbing its ears.

“You’re all covered in mud, buddy.” Kamren reached for the dog, but it jumped back, so he returned to the car and sat with the door open, taking a few minutes to finish his smoke.

“It’s okay,” he said, as the dog approached again. It was a scruffy looking thing, no collar, but didn’t seem feral.

“Where d’ya live?” He looked around the quiet street but didn’t think a householder who had garden gnomes would welcome a twenty-something in a hoodie and low-slung jeans on their doorstep in the dark. He stood, and the dog dashed back behind the car. Kamren followed, and squatted beside it.

“Tell you what,” he said, rubbing the dog’s ears. “I can get you cleaned up and fed. There’s those busybody Facebook groups. Some nosy Nellie will know where you belong. Neighbourhood Watch, that’s it. Always good for a little drama. What d’ya say?”

The dog wouldn’t budge from the edge of the road. It whimpered, looking anxiously to the ravine. Kamren clicked the flashlight app on his phone and shone the light toward the creek.

Was that a moan?

“Is someone down there? Hello?”

He heard it again.

The dog barked and scrambled through the brambles toward the creek.

“Whoa.” Kamren said. “I’m gonna need help.”

He texted his father and headed after the dog, down the muddy slope. ■



Non-fiction



First Place

The Lonely Sea

Wendy Bone

One day in the summertime, I busted my father out of the care home and took him to the beach. The lady from Driving Miss Daisy’s special wheelchair vehicle rolled him up the ramp and buckled his chair into place, and as we navigated the scenic back roads chatting about how nice it was to get out for some fresh air, he piped up in a faraway voice.

“I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky...”

The line seemed to come out of nowhere. I’d never heard it before, but the words captivated me. I turned to look at my father in his straw Panama hat, peering through wire-rimmed spectacles with a mysterious smile on his face.

“...and all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by...”

He squinted and his voice trailed off.

“Is that a song?” I asked. My father has always loved jazz, especially Louis Armstrong. But this sounded different, more like one of the sea shanties he’d sung when we were out sailing the Gulf Islands. Tacking through the eye of the wind, my father, in his element, would sing and trim the sails while my mother manned the tiller and my brother and I watched for deadheads—floating logs that could rip a hole in the hull.

“Nah. It’s a poem. An old one.” He squinted again, first one eye, then the other, attempting to locate the memory hiding somewhere in the tangled synapses of his brain. Finally, he conceded defeat. “I dunno what his name is but I remember learning it as a schoolboy.”

At the beach, the sun was at its zenith. It shone down on the sea, a group of children in matching day-camp shirts and an old man, dark as a nut, sporting a tiny Speedo. I pushed my father’s wheelchair along the seawall, over the bumps where tree roots pushed up through the cement, past the

rocky point where the Coast Salish totem woman stood. Carved from a single piece of cedar, she raised her arms to the sky.

We wanted to see her more closely but a low rock wall and soft sand blocked the way. “Not very wheelchair accessible,” I mused. I hadn’t realized how much of an obstacle course the world is for people in wheelchairs. It had been only two months since my father, once an active skier, sailor, and boat builder, had fallen and fractured his back, ending up in the hospital. For the first time in his life my father had to use a wheelchair, and for the first time in mine I saw him helpless. He kept falling trying to get out of the chair. Because of his Alzheimer’s, he forgot that his legs wouldn’t work anymore. Once, alarmed that he wasn’t in his hospital room, I searched the entire ward and finally found him sprawled on the bathroom floor in his pyjamas. My strong, independent, sea-loving father just couldn’t understand why he wasn’t able to do the things he’d always done. That’s when my mother, brother and I were forced to make the decision we had been dreading having to make. I still feel guilty about it.

We stopped for a rest. All the benches along the seawall bore plaques dedicated to loved ones who had passed. I often read them and tried to imagine who the loved ones were, what their lives had been like. This one said:

H. CHALMERS MORRIS
I must go down to the seas again
To the lonely sea and the sky

My heart quickened. I could hardly believe it. I had never heard of this poem before, and here it was again, twice in the space of an hour.

“Dad, look! It’s the poem you just told me about in the car.”

From beneath the brim of his hat, he peered at the letters on the plaque. “Well...what do you know?”

We sat contemplating the sailboats skimming the bay, the beleaguered trees of Stanley Park, thinned out from increasingly severe winter storms, and the Coast Salish totem woman embracing the sky. It had been years since we had gone sailing together. My father would never set foot on a boat again. But we could still enjoy them from afar.

That night I searched for the poem online. It’s called “Sea Fever,” by John Masefield. Once the poet laureate of Britain, he wrote it at the turn of the 20th century. But he’s long gone now.

I printed out the poem and brought it to the care home the next day. We were drinking tea in the garden when I showed it to him. His eyes lit up as he grasped the paper with a tremulous hand. Together, we read it aloud.

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking,

And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking...

“Isn't that something.” He reached for my hand. “This is exactly what we're going through right now.” His eyes misted over and his hand, covered in age spots and threaded with blue veins, felt so frail in my own. But it was a bright sunny day, and my father still knew my name. ■



Non-fiction



Second Place

Loving Liberace

Wendy Alden

I've no idea where the thought came from to write a letter to Liberace when I was only about 8 years old. Even then it seems my personality showed a determination of purpose which meant once the idea had formed, I had to do it. Since I already had been writing letters to my grandparents as well as my aunts and uncles back in London, England, I had the awareness a stamp meant any letter could reach far away for the other person to read.

Liberace had a fifteen-minute television show which I watched weekly with my parents. We didn't have any musical instruments in our home then, so it was my first glimpse into a musical world. Liberace playing piano with his brother George who would play the violin. I didn't miss the show and would sit on the floor close to the TV. At the time, my parents were unaware I needed glasses, hence I always had to get closer to see Liberace and George clearly. When the show ended with the theme song, "I'll Be Seeing You," before Liberace disappeared from the screen, he would wink. My dad always then would say, "Wendy, you know he's winking at you, don't you?" This I believed with all my heart.

It was the wink which did it for me. After watching the show for several weeks, I made the decision to write to Liberace. I remember sitting with a pencil and paper writing to Liberace with the faith he would receive it somehow. I do know at the bottom of the letter, I wrote, "PS. I love you." I addressed the envelope just with, "To Liberace," and adding my home address in the top left corner as I knew to do. In those years past, there would have been no way to acquire a 2 LOVING LIBERACE complete address. My mum put a stamp on the envelope and walked me to the mailbox a block away. It was mailed with the belief the letter would definitely reach him.

No doubt my parents thought it was a sweet gesture on my part to write the letter and bless them for allowing me to mail it. I am sure they never expected what was going to happen a few months later.

I have no doubt they were both stunned to see delivered to our house and addressed to me was a larger envelope from California and from Liberace. The arrival of this envelope was exactly what I had hoped would happen with some verification my letter had reached him. Inside the envelope were two

glossy black and white photographs. One was of Liberace and one of George, both signed by each of them. I can't recall any conversations about how it was possible an envelope mailed from Vancouver, Canada was able to find its way to his business office in Palm Springs, California. I like to think postal workers realized it was a child writing to him and somehow were able to acquire an address. Then it was passed along through the Canadian Postal service and then the United State Postal service until it was delivered as I had hoped and as it was addressed to, "To Liberace." Six months later before Christmastime, I received a holiday postcard from Liberace. Which once again, I'm certain astonished my parents.

I still have all these treasures from my childhood including the envelope of the first correspondence. I hope that in his own way, Liberace loved me back enough to send the mail he did to a child with their sweet innocent declaration of love. ■





Non-fiction



Third Place

Crossing the Sacred Valley

Angela Douglas

We had been in Cusco for three nights to get used to the altitude after our long journey from Vancouver. We were a group of sixteen lucky travel agents sent to hike the Lares Trek as an alternative option to the ever-popular Inca Trail. Peru has been at the top of my list of must-see travel destinations for as long as I can remember.

Most of us were adjusting well. I was starting to acclimate to the thinner air, though the first day was strenuous. Not long after arrival, I tried Coca Tea. The tea was readily available in the lobby of our hotel. The coca plant leaves are known for their ability to alleviate altitude sickness and are also used by Andean indigenous people for other medicinal purposes.

We spent our time in Cusco, visiting the sites and enjoying local delicacies. On our last night there, I got brave and tried guinea pig, though only a bite. We ended our night in Cusco with my favourite Peruvian drink - a Pisco Sour, made of Pisco liquor, egg whites, angostura bitters, simple syrup and lemon juice.

We woke early, eagerly anticipating this leg of the journey. The group loaded the bus with our identical bags, labelled only with our first name. They kept the bags uniform to restrict what we could pack and identify as belonging to this group.

Five minutes out of town, the driver pulled over and spoke animatedly to the tour guide. There were large rocks on the road. We looked up the street and saw upset villagers, more boulders, and trucks blocking the only road leading to the trek's start.

Our tour guide translated for us. They were protesting and using this roadblock to get the government's attention before their national census date. This road is relied upon by locals and tourists, which is why they chose it.

After waiting a couple of hours to see if it would break up, the tour leaders spoke with the person in charge of the protest to see if they could get more information. We also drove back into town and attempted to bring the mayor in ourselves. It was futile. We went back to our roadside spot at the start of the protest and continued to wait.

A kind lady who owned a nearby store offered up her home and kitchen when she found out the porters would make us lunch on the sidewalk. A grand gesture that we gladly accepted. The porters set everything up in her backyard, and the lady and her family helped prep and serve the lunch.

As we were finishing our meal, we heard people marching toward the blockade. There were only a dozen or so near us, but we noticed a lot more in the distance. We didn't realize until he returned that one of our guides had disappeared for a few moments.³ The tour guides decided to go through the picket line while there was a distraction. They told us they had secured a vehicle on the other side and had to go now if we wanted to go.

"Grab a bag, any bag, and run!"

So we did. We grabbed the bags one by one and raced behind one guide while the other brought up the rear. We made it through without any significant issues and discovered that the vehicle on the other side was a flat deck (fenced) pineapple truck.

"Unload the pineapples, quickly, onto the road." Said our guide while his eyes darted around.

We dropped our bags and started an assembly line moving the pineapples off the truck and onto the ground. We were done quickly and then hoisted ourselves up onto the deck. All of us and our bags crammed in as we held on tight and left the centre of the protest.

As we were backing up, we heard a loud pop, and everyone flattened - it sounded like gunfire. We were already on edge from the stress of running through the protest.

"It's just a roof tile." Shouted the only person whose eyes were still open.

We laughed nervously as we saw that our escape vehicle had hit a building. We pulled away and settled in for the journey ahead.

It was a long drive up narrow, treacherous roads flanked with cliffs to our adjusted starting point in the trek. Two hours into the flatbed pineapple truck adventure, we were all dying to use the washroom. Someone finally asked the driver to stop somewhere. He agreed, but for whatever reason, waited an additional twenty minutes to pull over. As I weighed the pros and cons of humiliating myself by urinating where I sat, he finally stopped.

The first person off the truck yelled, "Men on the left and women on the right!" as we all dropped our trousers and relieved ourselves in the open without hesitation. It was funny afterward, but not while we were holding our breath and our bladders.

We finally reached the starting point of the trip (Wacawasi), and we were running out of daylight. Everyone quickly grabbed their walking sticks and headed out. Shortly after setting off,

our group fell into three distinct subgroups based on our pace. Fortunately for me, at least two of us were at the same speed. We only had to hike for three and half-hours that afternoon. It would have been between closer to ten if we started where we were supposed to.

Despite our best efforts, we spent the last hour hiking in the dark. We were relieved when we saw the campsite in the distance. It was impressive that our porters and chefs ran past us with the gear to set up camp and have dinner ready for us upon arrival.

Bagged from the drama of the day, everyone was ready for bed. The hike and the altitude were affecting some hikers more than others. I was one of the people having a rough time. Even though everyone was so tired, practically no one slept. That night we camped at 4220 meters above sea level (Sondor), and most of us experienced pounding hearts and trouble taking deep breaths. I would become exhausted or winded, just trying to roll over. It was also chilly. I was grateful for my tent mate beside me, though it was too difficult to talk, it was nice not to be alone.

After having a big breakfast and filling our bottles with water and coca tea, we set out at sunrise. In the five short days I had been in Peru, I had grown fond of this sweet dirt-tasting coca tea.

Today's hike was extremely challenging. The gaps between the groups grew more distant as some struggled with the altitude. Thank goodness for the coca tea, the porters and the alpacas who carried our things. At the most challenging moments – I could only walk five or so steps then would have to stop. After sipping some tea and eventually just chewing coca leaves, I could walk further without a break.

It was also the longest day, hiking 16 km. Being in the middle group was comforting. We knew that there were people in front of and behind us. However, we were also on our own a lot and would hear Julio (our trek leader) playing his pan flute in the distance to grab our attention to tell us that we were, yet again, going the wrong way.

Each corner we took presented a new challenge. My hiking partner and I had become close while facing these obstacles together. Our collective fear of heights and small spaces made this trek a version of 'Fear Factor' that there was no turning back from.

We walked footpaths that were barely wide enough to stand on, with a steep hundred-meter drop as an alternative exit. The paths were so ridiculous we kept begging one another to take a photo to show people at home. Both of us were too scared to reach into our backpacks, as we were sure that would throw us off our balance and result in our demise. While edging along the narrow pathways, there were times where we didn't think we could do it. We would sometimes cheer each other on; other times silently shed tears of terror as we heard Julio's pan flute propelling us onward.

The relief we felt when the scary cliff traversing ended was immeasurable. We relaxed until we saw some caves we would need to go through. I'm not sure we could call them caves.

'Small holes of doom' was the term that rang true in my mind. They were between four and five feet tall and relatively narrow.

We had to bend our bodies in half and hunch over to fit without removing our backpacks. The mutual claustrophobia and fear of being trapped drove us to go through them one at a time and shout when we got to the other side. Thankfully the majority of the 'doom-holes' weren't that long.

We made it through the two highest passes, both at 4520 meters, one in Wacawasi and one in Wayruruyoc. As we approached the peak, it was not lost on me how fortunate I am; this opportunity, this adventure, my health, and my life. I took at least six hundred photos, but not a single one can relay to you the humbling experience of being one tiny insignificant spec of a human on these massive, majestic mountains. The Andes were breath-stopping.

I stumbled up to the peak and took it all in. It's tradition to leave a rock on top of the towers of stones (similar to an inukshuk) left by other hikers. Depleted of air and energy, I grabbed the smallest rock I could find and carefully lifted it into place.

Upon arrival at camp, silence fell as we wolfed our food and had a great night's sleep at a lower altitude after an exhausting day. Food never felt so good.

This last day of the trek was a lot better. Aside from a very steep 15-minute climb, it was downhill for the rest of the hike. A couple of people had knee injuries, making it more difficult going down. I wasn't too proud to get on my butt and scoot down the hill a few necessary times.

We got to see Pummamarca, an Inca ruin, and go through a few villages on the way to Ollantaytambo, where our trek ended. Our visits to Patacancha and Huilloc were remarkable. Children and their families invited us into their homes and offered us food and drinks. They didn't have much; it was such an honour to be there. Children sang Quechua songs as guinea pigs scuttled around. I was equally impressed by the children's traditional attire, as I was by how they ran around barefoot on such crazy terrain.

We said goodbye to the children and hiked the last few kilometres to Ollantaytambo, where we went out for lunch before hopping the train to Aguas Calientes. There we would spend a night relaxing in the hot springs before a sunrise visit to Machu Picchu.

In those two and a half days of the trek, we encountered narrow trails with cliffs, small caves, snow, rain, sun, glaciers, forks in the path, wobbly log bridges, and beautiful people. We made it. During this adventure, we were gifted moments of marvel and pride.

The Lares Trek is a path less travelled than the Inca Trail Trek, but far superior, in my opinion. For a less commercial, more authentic experience free of other tourists, choose Lares. If you want to test your limits and face your fears, this is the trek for you. My experience was transformative, timeless and sacred. ■



Poetry



First Place

Waiting For Their Light (Glosa)

Janet Kvammen

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
"The Peace of Wild Things" — Wendell Berry*

When the red cedars are sorrowed in grief,
their branches bent low over stagnant pools,
the grosbeaks and crossbills have gone silent,
and the whole world is a brewing storm,
I will rush into the deep folds of the forest.
Her fragile jade light, infused with amber warmth, brings
escape. Into her ebony limbs, long I fall —
not to forget but to remember.
Here in this place a heart sings,
I come into the peace of wild things.

I come into the peace of wild things
where each breathe is resurrection.
One moment a new year's day,
birthed screaming from the tender divine.
Where I take comfort from the land,
there is a truth in nature, so beautifully wrought.
An uninvited guest here. This. A socially-distant Eden.
Ancient mammoths and cascadian streams;
Freedom fighters - without story or plot
who do not tax their lives with forethought

in the quiet dawn. A sly fox scurries south. Unforgiving,
on edge of epiphany, bursting forth in plenty. Still - thorns,
and luscious blackberry. Aspen trees our united front.
Between strength and perseverance: the shadow of metamorphosis.
Fear unreachable. Within the blooming - a viral inflorescence.
No more sacrifices. No more lambs sent to slaughter.
Yet. Here. An incubating chrysalis of hope. In dreams, blue fields of poppies unfurl.
Push us through loss, heads up. In the family portrait of humanity —
death is the mother of beauty, love the daughter
of grief. I come into the presence of still water,

and above it all, I see how the ever-shifting western sky
percolates callow hues of rose and burnished copper.
The broken sky sings itself back into watercolour blue larimar.
There can be nothing left of the way things used to be.
But the dreams that we came from — they shall remain,
their deepest cracks filled with gold. All their brilliant scars
left behind to tell the tale. And again each night
the fading sun will glimmer upon such glory and wonder.
The raven will speak to us. Her poem is ours.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars



Poetry



Second Place

My Cat Watched Us

Christine Cowan

My cat watched us making love this morning.
Should we make her leave? I asked you.
No, you said, she's just a dumb animal,
and besides, she looked so comfortable
lying on the fuzzy blue blanket
at our feet, washing her fur
with her delicate, pink tongue.
But later, in the tangle of arms and legs,
I looked over your shoulder and
she was staring at us
with her amber-colored eyes.
What if, I said to you,
there is something in this reincarnation thing?
What if she were a child from medieval times,
her spirit risen again,
trying to figure out what we were doing
in this ridiculous posture,
or, worse,
what if she thinks you are attacking me?
It might frighten her,
and we wouldn't want that,

our connection might be considered
corruption of a minor.
Or perhaps, she might have been a lecherous
old man,
a recycled eighteenth-century pervert
getting his jollies at our expense.
I sat up and looked at you
in the rumple of sheets.
What if the cat is one of our grandfathers
returned to earth,
a second-hand soul, sent ostensibly
to watch over us,
and now, much to his embarrassment,
privy to our lust?
You laughed at me. Told me
don't be so paranoid.

But later on, when you thought I was sleeping,
I saw you get up and
gently shoo her out the door.



Poetry



Third Place

Milkweed Birds

Alexander Hamilton-Brown

The monarchs of summer have gone from the milkweed bloom.
Now winter husks are perched on stiffened stems,
Frozen, like birds, iced to stocks of steel.
Tails turned up, they point their beaks to the sky.

A blistering wind blows blindly over ice-bound fields
Shaking a milkweed husk on a frigid stem,
It frees a downy seed from a rigid corpse
And floats it through the air to an icy tomb;

There to sleep, impervious to winter's keep,
It waits the warming hand of coming spring
To be another fragrant milkweed bloom
And welcome back the monarch once again.



Youth Winner



The Caspian Tiger

Anita Movazzafi

North-Western Asia; 1935.

The hunters waited to strike on clear nights when the stars twinkled high and the moon's glow felt welcoming. The group had entered the jungle in the dead of the night. They were 7 men, led by the village's most famous tiger hunter, who had for the first time brought along his 14-year-old son, Ibrahim, for the hunt. The men entered into the thick jungle of the north with their rifles slung unto their backs and their chests puffed out. Ibrahim stumbled along in the footsteps of the men, and tried to imitate their air of fearlessness, not knowing that the men themselves were also a scared of the night's jungle. Ibrahim's father carried a single torch that helped guide the way to the prime location; the habitat of the tigers. The men were villagers who were paid great sums of money by noble men and shahs alike to hunt tigers. The skins were precious as they were of the Caspian tiger, a tiger that had fur that was thicker and brighter than any other tiger. It was a grand animal, that stood taller than other tigers at the time, and was longer too, with distinct broad shoulders. The Caspian tiger was known for its incredibly large paws, that often left great footprints in the soft earth. On this particular night, the men had found a set of unusually large footprints, that seemed fresh, and were following the footprints hoping to meet a large tiger. They were but silent shadows of one another, that moved through the foliage with an electrifying mix of caution and curiosity. It was not long before Ibrahim's father abruptly stopped in his tracks and turned to the group with his left pointer finger on his mouth and his right pointer finger directed towards a small pond ahead. The tiger's orange fur glowed in the moonlight while it sat drinking from the pond. Even the most experienced hunters were left speechless as they set their eyes on the tiger. Ibrahim had opened his mouth in awe of the tiger. The animal seemed to be sculpted by a perfect hand, with uniform stripes running from its head down to its tail. As predicted, the tiger was enormous, with paws the size of dinner plates. Its presence alone was menacing. The less experienced men felt their knees shake, while the more experienced men felt the shaking in their minds. All at once, Ibrahim's father let out a howl to catch the attention of the tiger. The tiger noticed the hunters and let out a purr, but as just as soon as the sound had escaped the tiger's mouth, it was overtaken by the roar of a gunshot, headed straight for the tiger's skull. As the tiger bled, the men were able to get closer to the animal. The air was humid and still. There was no celebration, as Ibrahim's naive young self had initially thought there would be. Ibrahim felt his dinner rise up to his throat and a tear shed down his face. He locked eyes with his father, who looked at him with disgrace. Two of the men tied up the tiger's legs and started to carry the tiger out of the jungle. The other men

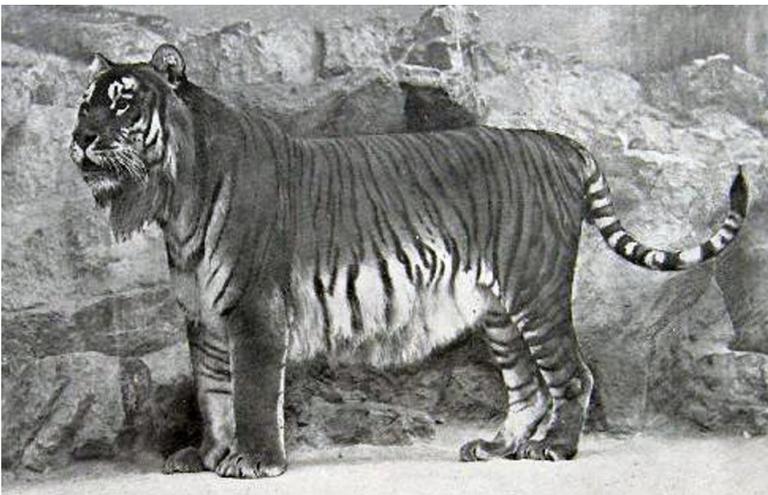
cracked open sunflower seeds on the way back. They chatted in whispers and laughed in roars. The night's deed had been done. At one point, Ibrahim's father pulled Ibrahim aside and let out some words in a quick breath.

"Do not ever shed tears, boy. This is how we make the money for the bread you eat."

The words that were meant to be comforting instead felt like daggers to Ibrahim. For Ibrahim, the stars seemed to glow a little softer, and the moon's light did no longer feel welcoming on the way back. The tiger, a creature who had once had a life, a purpose in the food-chain, and a soul, was soon reduced to a rug. It was bought by a nobleman from Ibrahim's father to be hung in a study. As Ibrahim watched his father count the money made from the tiger skin, many different thoughts swirled through his head. He had thought it would feel heroic to defeat a beast like a tiger, but Ibrahim felt weak. He felt deep down that it was not heroic to kill an innocent creature in the name of sport or business. Ibrahim thought of the nobleman who had bought the rug, and his father who only knew how to make money through selling tiger skins. Ibrahim started to feel frustrated. His father had led the killing of a tiger and was guilty in that respect, but was the nobleman who had bought the rug not also at fault? Ibrahim thought of how his father always walked back from hunts with a smile on his face, but how the nobleman had also walked away from Ibrahim's house with a smile on his face. *Without people like the nobleman, my dad would not even be hunting. He might've instead been an ironworker or baker like the some of the other men in the village, thought Ibrahim. The hunter, my dad, is not doing great things, but the consumer who is enabling my father's trade is the hidden enemy. The consumer has a choice. This is my father's livelihood; maybe it is not so-* Ibrahim was snapped out of his thoughts by his father calling his name.

"Ibrahim, I must go on a hunt tonight. You're joining right? I'll need as many hands as I can get."

Ibrahim stared at his father and thought for a moment. He then opened his mouth to reply, but it dawned upon him that he would prefer to be silent. ■



The Caspian Tiger was a breed of tiger that went extinct in the mid 1900's. It was larger than other tigers and lived in a region that spanned from eastern Turkey to western China.

Upcoming Events

Events Calendar

- May 8** **NSWA Saturday Write-in @ 10am**
- Join at this Zoom link:**
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87105551221?pwd=WjM2UVA3V0ZFZlRNNnovbXFVK01Sdz09>
Passcode: NSWA
- May 17** **NSWA General Meeting @7pm with guest speaker Janie Chang**
- Join at this Zoom link:**
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89139367782?pwd=SWN6QzNHUThd2V6MCt6RUNkMTRVOT09>
Passcode: 437005
- June 1** **Dare to be Heard @ 7pm**
- Join at this Zoom link:**
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83444689556?pwd=RFhxcjZ3ROJJZGVTNWFzRURGYTZXTU09>
Passcode: NSWA
- June 12** **NSWA Saturday Write-in @10am**
- Join at this Zoom link:**
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87105551221?pwd=WjM2UVA3V0ZFZlRNNnovbXFVK01Sdz09>
Passcode: NSWA
- June 21** **Year-End Wrap Up Party TBC**
-
- July – August** **Summer break**
- September 20** **AGM and Election for 2021 – 2022 Executive**

Call for Submissions! Deadline June 4

Email: editor@nswriters.org

Submissions are now open for our Summer Newsletter. Please send:

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

Submission Guidelines

1. Writing news and art creations from NSWA members only please.
2. Email your submission or query to editor@nswriters.org
3. Writing that appears in the NSWA newsletter is eligible for submission to the annual NSWA Writing Contest.
4. Contributors are responsible for the accuracy, originality and reliability of their content.
5. Check your submissions for spelling, grammar and punctuation prior to submission. Word attachments are preferred over email text. Accompanying images welcome.
6. Publication in *WRITE ON!* newsletter is at the discretion of the Newsletter Editor in consultation with the Executive.