



25TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL WRITING CONTEST

WRITING BY 2ND PLACE WINNERS

Judge's comments by

Donna Besel - Creative Nonfiction

Shaun Hatton - Critical Writing

Elisabeth de Mariaffi - Short Crime

George Murray - Poetry

Lauren Carter - Bill MacDonald
Prize for Prose

FLASH FICTION 2023 WINNERS



WINTER 2024

515
2023

Winter 2024

Content Editor: Charles Campbell
Design Editor: Brenda Fisk

2023/24 NOWW Board Members

President:
Heather Dickson

Secretary:
Mary Gastmeier

Treasurer:
Charles Campbell

Administrator:
Don Parsons

Contest Coordinator:
Meagan Stockwell

Published three times a year by
Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop
Box 425 1100 Memorial Ave, Thunder
Bay, ON, P7B 4A3

admin@nowwwriters.ca
www.nowwwriters.ca

Charitable Registration
85050 3269 RR0001

Copyright © 2023, by the individual authors
and photographers.

No transmission of this publication without
the consent of NOWW.

Cover art by Stacey O'Sullivan
Content art photos: Creative Commons

IN THIS ISSUE:

Editor's Message - Charles Campbell	1
A Note from the President - Heather Dickson	2
NOWW Awards	3
2023 Flash Fiction Winners	6
2023 NOWW Writing Contest Second Place Winners	9
Poetry - Chantel Daniels	9
Creative Nonfiction - Celia Chandler	11
Literary Critical Writing - John Pringle	14
Short Crime Fiction - Willow Healy	16
Bill MacDonald Prize for Prose - Irene McCuaig	22
LitFest 2024 information	26

NOWW Magazine is the product of the
Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop.

We are always looking for new Board members.

If you are interested in a position,
please send an email to admin@nowwwriters.ca, or
contact our President directly for more information.

Published with the support of



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Why NOWW Magazine?

When NOWW was founded, there was no magazine. There was 807, but it was not a NOWW publication. Then in 2010 the board decided we needed a magazine that was the voice of the organization.

14 years later, we are still publishing. However, a lot has changed in the world of publishing. Web-based and digital-only magazines abound. Print media has shrunk with less magazines and papers. Many markets have not increased payment rates and others don't even pay for content.

NOWW has made some changes too. The organization has grown in our program offerings but shrunk in our active volunteer base. A few years back we moved to digital-only for two of our three annual issues. Although we still include member writing and stories, we mostly feature our contest winning entries in the magazine.

Should this be a literary magazine that is sold in stores or on our website? Is it enough to showcase contest winning stories and use the NOWW newsletter to inform members about events and activities? Is it time to go 100% digital, or do you want to hold paper? Would you pay more for a bigger magazine? Would your friends subscribe if it was for sale to the public? Anyone want to become the Content Editor?



Charles Campbell

Please reach out
and let me know
how, or if,
NOWW Magazine
matters to you.

EMAIL: CCAMPBEL@TBAYTEL.NET

It is time for a review and a plan going forward. I need to know what this magazine means to you and how it can add value to your membership and to the mission of NOWW to further writing in and about Northwestern Ontario.

Please reach out and let me know how, or if, NOWW Magazine matters to you. What do you want to see in it and what form should it take. Share your thoughts and ideas. I will use your ideas and feedback to develop a plan to bring to the AGM in September. A plan that reflects what you want and can be done with the resources we have.

Charles Campbell
NOWW Content Editor

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Hey NOWW members,

This has been a wild year so far with a pretty full schedule of events! With a brand-new board and the beginnings of a Strategic Plan, we ran several successful workshops, partnered with the city to host the Culture Days Literary Stage, and spotlighted several book launches by local authors.

Christmas saw our past-president, Cathi Winslow, step down from the board for personal reasons and I took on the role, grateful for the practices she was putting in place. After many years of arranging our reading schedule, Tessa Soderberg also stepped back, and it made me realize that despite the vacuum, that's the very nature of a volunteer organization.

Organizations are kinetic structures, always changing, moving forward, finding their proverbial feet. NOWW is no different, and while we all love writing, being an artist in a busy world is a challenge. Giving back to the community must balance with taking the time to create, and I celebrate those who try to do both, no matter how long the commitment. Volunteering in any capacity is a beautiful thing, so I say Well Done and Thank You to both Cathi and Tessa for following their hearts as helpers and creators.



Heather Dickson

**I'm looking
forward to
LitFest 2024,
including a
Book Fair and
Literary Market**

For me, I'm looking forward to LitFest 2024. We'll be trying a new format (including a day-long Book Fair/Literary Market) and I can't wait to share the details next month! With two more workshops and the continuation of Vera Constantineau's delightful Wednesday Words, we have a full spring schedule and I hope these next few months will excite and inspire you to keep those words flowing!

**Heather Dickson
NOWW President**

NOWW AWARDS

The Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop was founded to support writers in the Northwest and one of the ways we do this is by recognizing writers and builders in our literary community. We offer two awards which are presented at the annual Literary Awards Party.

The Kouhi Award

The Kouhi Award was established by NOWW in 1999 to recognize “outstanding contributions to the literature of Northwestern Ontario.” It is named in honour of poet Elizabeth Kouhi and is given to a living person who has a significant history of contributing to the literature of Northwestern Ontario. Nominees will be respected members of the literary community and will have been recognized as such by their peers, generally through publication of works, receipt of grants, and other such achievements.

The first recipient of the Kouhi Award was Elizabeth Kouhi. Since then 20 awards have been granted including Elinor Barr (2001), Charles Wilkins (2000), Jean E. Pendziwol (2006), Hazel Fulford (2010), Bill MacDonald (2011), Sharon Irvine (2013), John Pringle (2014), Richard Wagamese (2015), Michael Christie (2016), Joan M. Baril (2017), Ruby Slipperjack (2018), H.L. Dickson (2019), Joe Fiorito (2021) and most recently Roy Blomstrom (2023).

The Margaret Phillips Award

The Margaret Phillips Award (previously the Burnford Award) was first established in 2009 and is intended to recognize a “builder,” either a group or individual who has made outstanding contributions to publishing, promoting, or supporting the literature of Northwestern Ontario. The intent is to recognize those who support the practice and community of writing, as distinct from writers. If the nominee is an organization, the organization should be active at the time of selection. If the nominee is an individual, the recipient should be living at the time of selection.

The first Burnford Award was given to the Thunder Bay Public Library. Winners include the Sleeping Giant Writers Festival (2010), Barb Matousek and Wendy MacDonald (2011) and the founders of NOWW (Deborah de Bakker, Rosalind Maki, Charles Wilkins and Jim Foulds) (2012). 2016 marked the first year of the renamed Margaret Phillips award. Award winners include Cathy MacDonald (2021) and most recently Latitude 46 Publishing (2023).

You can find out more at <https://www.nowwwriters.ca/the-kouhi-and-phillips-awards.html>. If you feel that there is a person or organization that deserves the Kouhi or Phillips award, send a brief (two pages maximum) statement describing why the person or organization you’re nominating deserves the award to admin@nowwwriters.ca before March 31st, 2024.

Nominations do not guarantee that an award will be made in any given year, but nominations are held over to consider in the following year. Individuals and groups are only eligible to receive an award once. Recipients do not need to be NOWW members or affiliated with NOWW.

The Kouhi Award

Remarks by Roy Blomstrom

on receiving the Kouhi Award, May 12, 2023

Why do I write?

I write because when I was in grade three my teacher complimented me on my story about Peter the Parrot who accidentally flew through a window in the Empire State Building.

I write because my grade five and six teacher, Mrs. Cupples, chose me to read aloud to the class for half an hour at the end of each day while she marked papers at the back of the room. She taught me to read – *really* read – and how to make my own writing expressive.

I write because my grade seven teacher was Fred Goodfellow of the Founders' Museum. He taught me to examine what seemed to be old junk – but junk that became items of importance when he talked about it – keys that unlocked the past when it was examined closely and against the march of time.

I write because my grade eight teacher, Mrs. Perrier, showed me how to simplify the complex and how to reveal the importance of what sometimes seems trivial.

I write because Jim Smithers put me in charge of his adult education class the summer I turned seventeen, and a year later let me teach his grade 11 summer school class for a few weeks when he needed to be absent.

I write because Joe Stocking, a prospector, took me under his wing in the summers of both 1965 and 1966. I learned how to hunt for gold, how to paddle a canoe, how to help run a portable diamond drill, and even how to build a toilet out of a young tree. And I learned that even prospectors can get hooked on science fiction.

I write because in the summers of 1967 and 68 I unloaded grain from the boxcars that rolled into various grain elevators. At noon I learned how to read people. I learned how to play poker and win. I learned I could become any person I wished to be.

I write because in the summer of 1969 I worked on the railroad and, because the modern track-laying trains had broken down, I learned how to lay track as it was done in the 1800s. I learned how to live in the past for a time, and write about it.

I write because the Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop has made available opportunities for me to share my work – poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and plays. We writers appreciate audiences.

Thank you very much for this award. It's an honour to have my name associated with the previous winners, as well as with Elizabeth Kouhi herself. I knew her only briefly at Sir Winston Churchill C.V.I. before she retired from teaching, but I remember her dedication and skill at making poetry and prose come alive for her students.

Now, why do YOU write?



The Margaret Phillips Award

Remarks by Heather Campbell

Publisher for Latitude 46 Publishing and Festival Director for Wordstock Sudbury Literary Festival on receiving the Margaret Phillips Award, May 12, 2023

Thank you Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop.

I was thrilled and surprised to get the nomination for the Margaret Philips Award. This is recognition for a builder in the literary arts, and I feel very much like a builder. The houses are up and people are living in them. Thank you so much for noticing.

In early 2013, I was working as a freelance journalist and had gone to a number of literary festivals in Southern Ontario. I thought we need to have this in Northern Ontario. I came back and found some people that wanted the same thing as I did.

In 2014, Scrivner Press was closing. The publisher Lawrence Steven had decided to retire and was moving to Southern Ontario, and I decided that we still needed to have a publisher in Northern Ontario. I had children that were gone off to university, one of them all the way across the ocean so I had time and most importantly, I had the passion to build the structures and to gather people around to help create these organizations that help writers and the literary arts thrive in Northern Ontario.

It's been ten years since we started Wordstock Sudbury and it's been eight years for Latitude 46. I remain optimistic that the contributions that these organizations have made to the literary arts is significant, and that the community of artists are making a huge contribution to our lives in northern Ontario.

Thank you so much again for the recognition and being part of the literary arts with me in Northern Ontario.



2023 FLASH FICTION WINNERS

Flash Fiction: THIRD PLACE

Kelly Griffiths

Kelly Griffiths recently retired after teaching English for 30 years and lives with her family on Robin Hill Farm in Oxdrift, Ontario. She is currently studying creative writing at Western University when she isn't out rambling around the fields and forests with her two pups.

A Wives' Tale

The woman draped in a light-coloured cloak walks unsteadily forward to commence what needs doing before darkness falls. The warmth of the late afternoon sun coupled with her dread of the task at hand results in a sheen of perspiration coating her ruddy face. She reaches her destination, places her hands gently on the worn wooden box, and takes a deep breath to keep her fear from showing.

With eyes slightly averted, the woman addresses those gathered with words that at first betray her anxiety, but grow stronger as she proceeds. She clears her throat and begins, "I'm here to tell you some sad news... early this morning your mistress died. She will no longer be visiting you each day—that job will now fall on me. I hope you will continue to work just as hard for me as you did for her." And, with that said, she turns and walks away offering no more details than are necessary and leaving a low buzz in the air.

Around the wooden dais, the small, striped bodies vibrate and continue to enter and exit as their true queen, both respected and respectful, gently folds her wings and places them once more on her back. A new dance of contentment begins.

Crisis averted.



Flash Fiction: SECOND PLACE

Carmen Kinniburgh

Carmen Kinniburgh is a Thunder Bay writer and freelance editor who has worn a few different hats over the years – in media relations, public affairs and communications, editing and science writing. Her work has been published in newspapers, magazines, websites, reports and occasionally her parents' Christmas letter.

This morning, over coffee

He left in a huff, scraping his chair loudly along the floor and drawing the attention of nearby tables. The café shook as the door slammed heavily, pushed shut by the October wind. What was left of his milky coffee shuddered for a moment in its porcelain cup. She kept her eyes lowered to the table, hands folded in her lap, a flush burning on her pale cheeks. Eventually, she pulled his cup towards her, adding a packet of sugar and moving the spoon in slow circles, watching as it all dissolved.

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he had asked her moments before, his dark eyebrows raised but his attention elsewhere. She had been watching him quietly for some time, just her foot moving up and down on a crossed leg, a lioness waiting for the pounce. “Oh, I don’t know,” she had replied, matching his nonchalant tone, her foot going still. “What are my options?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” he said smiling, unaware, fingers moving across his screen. When she didn’t respond, he finally looked up and took her in, confusion crossing his face, then exasperation. “I just thought you might have some ideas, that’s all,” he explained, stating the obvious, making the absurdity of her reaction clear. “Besides,” he added, looking away from her face. “You never like my suggestions anyway.”

The clock ticked on the wall. The wind outside made a whooshing noise, blowing leaves and garbage down the street. Steam hissed from the espresso machine and baristas called out the names of waiting customers. “Flat white for Shannon?” *Tick, whoosh, hiss.* “Half-caff latte for Rob?”

“Maybe, if you paid more attention, you’d know what I like by now,” she finally said, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed, an invitation to step further into the ring. Instead, he had grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

He could have just apologized. Acknowledged the insinuation that it was her job to plan dinner, to manage the minutiae of their lives. He could have just told her that he understood, that he saw behind her hostile mask of critique and contempt. He could have kept his damn phone in his pocket, held her hand under the table, looked into her eyes. Shown her there was still something worth paying attention to. Something that could be saved.

At least that’s what I was thinking, even as I watched her stand up and put on her coat, wrap her woolen scarf around her neck. Watched her pass by the window and sit next to him on the bench, lean her head on his shoulder and let him pull her in close. While I tasted disappointment and jealousy, sharp and bitter on my tongue. As I swallowed it down with my own coffee, at my own table, sitting across from my husband with everything unsaid between us.

Flash Fiction: FIRST PLACE

Tiffany Jolowicz

Tiffany Jolowicz is a writer and a runner. She has two books, both available on Amazon – *How to Enjoy Your First Baby as if it Were Your Fifth* and *Ironwomen*. Tiffany has run more than 35 half marathons, 14 marathons, 1 mountain marathon, 1 ultra marathon, has finished 3 half distance triathlons, completed IRONMAN Switzerland & Challenge Roth. Alongside her training and writing, she is raising 5 kids.

Love your neighbor: Wisdom from a Zimbabwean mother whose son lives in Johannesburg.

A few months ago, Chamai left his homeland and his mother and moved to Jo'Burg.

"Sorry Ma, you know, I'll miss you, but it's the opportunity of a lifetime." Bursting with light and enthusiasm, he added. "You always said education's the key." He winked his wink.

"I know son, I know," She stood at the narrow door of their homey home and held him bravely. "Be safe son. Work hard."

"I'll send you food parcels." He waved from the back of the bus. Then she could no longer see his face as the dust curled up from the road and he disappeared into his future.

True to his word, he sent parcels. Chamai's mother opened them like it was her birthday. He sent all manner of foods: Papaya and peri-peri peppers, Cape Malay curry spice and rice, bay leaves and beans. Sometimes biltong or potatoes, raisins and lentil, maize meal and flour, honey and sugar. Chamai's mother bubbled the beans and roasted the rice, marinated chunks of meat and seasoned with spoonfuls of spice, balancing it all on her Calor gas cooking hob. In the age-old African way, the only way she knew, she shared her soups and savory dishes, her cakes and her breads. One November evening, her nephew came to visit. His round, youthful face was sticky and bothered.

"What's on your mind?" Chamai's mother asked.

He stepped over the threshold, folded his arms, and knitted his eyebrows. He ran a handkerchief over his forehead. "Chamai works hard for the foods that he sends you from Jo'Burg. I think he means for you to eat them not give them away."

Chamai's mother smiled and regarded this round, youthful face with love.

"Don't be so quick to judge and condemn Child. Remember, I hobble, am old and live all alone in this rural, draughty place. Suppose someone attacks me? In my house, a villain comes through that door. Who will protect me then, sweet nephew?"

He shrugged.

"Do you know how many miles it is from here to Johannesburg?"

"No, not exactly."

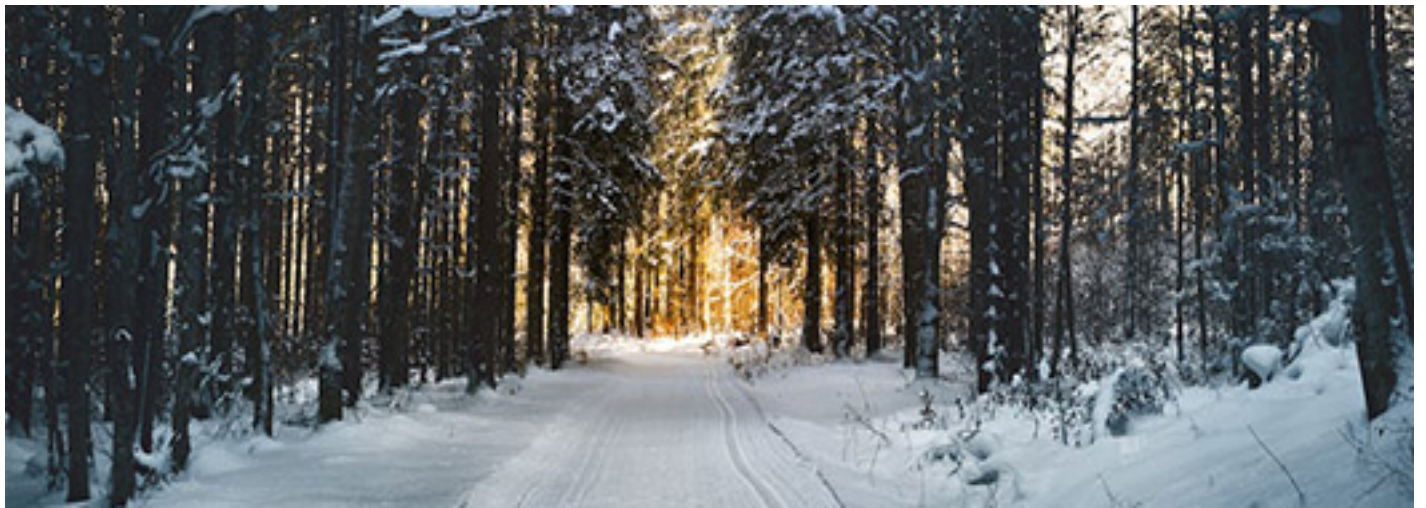
"787. And he doesn't even have a car! And I don't even have a phone." She chuckled to herself and scuttled into her kitchen, returning with a small Victorian tea-plate.

"Would you like some Chikenduza cake?"

He paused.

He regarded the round cake, picked at the pink icing and took a large bite.

*Chamai is a Zimbabwean name meaning 'belonging to a mother.'



2023 NOWW CONTEST SECOND PLACE WINNERS

POETRY

Judge: George Murray

George Murray is the author of nine books of poetry and aphorisms, most recently *Problematica: New and Selected Poems, 1995 - 2020* (ECW, 2021). He is the editor of Bookninja.com and [NewPoetry](http://NewPoetry.com), and he runs the online poetry school *Walk the Line*. He grew up in rural Ontario, but has lived in places as varied as Manhattan, Mexico, and coastal Italy, but has now settled in St. John's, Newfoundland.



George Murray



Chantel Daniels

SECOND PLACE: Chantel Daniels

Chantel Daniels has had her flash fiction, short fiction and creative non-fiction accepted for publication by *The Flexible Persona*, *The Passed Note*, *The Same* and *Ghost Parachute* online literary journals. She is working on her first collection of poetry. She lives in Peterborough.

Judge's comments: These raw poems provide a real feeling of emergence: a youthful speaker sifting through the weariness of reality to find the very specific moments and images that make up their life's mosaic. The images reveal grit and disappointment and hard lessons learned in settings that don't always provide much room for, or encouragement towards, improvement. And yet there's an undercurrent of nascent will here; will to see each thing for what it is, and in naming it, control it.

Purgatory is Earwigs in Bachelor Apartments

by Chantel Daniels

Purgatory is earwigs in bachelor apartments
It's boyfriends with secret sexualities
Blaming me for their anger
Mad that I "made everything about sex"

It's a red-headed boy(man) showing up
on his BMX bike
Skipping the small talk
Moving straight to ragged breathing
And not knowing how to demand
My own pleasure

It's an apartment-sized stove
Making single-serving Hamburger Helper
Rolling cigarettes from butts
from the ashtray
(but not always)

Purgatory is one night stands
In a single bed
In an apartment I didn't pay for
It's mildew in a tiny shower
And not knowing how to be alone
Without being lonely

It's being young but feeling
old
In a basement room
In a world designed
To break every wild thing
To label it
To box it up
To make it fit
When my edges were still sharp
New and brittle

Purgatory is temporary
And felt anything but
When I was sixteen

(I wish I could tell her)

Carnie

by Chantel Daniels

Hey, hey, hey
Look over here
(*call them in*)

Pitch 'till you win but make it count
The balloon store
Tub game
A new family found

But just like all the others
Father is indifferent
Or much too much involved
Mother is the jealous type
Creating more problems than she solved

Never be a lot lizard
But always on the lot
A jointee, a ride guy, a pocketful of fives

Sure it could be fun sometimes
Rode the *Round Up* and the *Gravitron*
For free
Laughed through the *Wacky Shack*
No tickets did we need
but at what cost?

Two pink lines
In a *Taco Bell* bathroom

Prize every time.

Empty Roll

by Chantel Daniels

There hasn't been toilet paper in the downstairs bathroom
For a full 32 hours
There's a box of Kleenex perched on the top of the garbage bin
For the one time
For the urgency
But that was yesterday
And today was still awful
So the tissue stays and the paper isn't replenished
Because sometimes having two bathrooms
Doesn't mean
You can pick yourself up off of a tiled floor
And sometimes a box of kleenex
Is the only self-care
Manageable.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Judge: Donna Besel

Donna Besel loves writing of all kinds, and does workshops and presentations for schools, libraries, universities, conferences, and retreats. She grew up at West Hawk Lake in Whiteshell Provincial Park and her “boreal stories” have appeared in various publications and earned national recognition. Her work has won the Prairie Fire Creative Nonfiction prize, the Great Canadian Literary Hunt, and has been longlisted multiple times for the CBC Literary Awards. The forests of Eastern Manitoba, where she has always lived, provide endless ideas and settings. Her first book, a collection of short stories called *Lessons from a Nude Man*, earned several award nominations. In 2021, the University of Regina Press published her memoir, *The Unravelling: Incest and the Destruction of a Family*.



Donna Besel



Celia Chandler

SECOND PLACE: Celia Chandler

Celia Chandler lives in Toronto where she spent COVID exploring her love for writing, so much so she quit lawyering. She won a Canadian Online Publishing Award for her series on her husband’s medically assisted death published on rabble.ca, was shortlisted in three [Wild Atlantic Writers Awards](#) contests, recently published in [Gemini Magazine](#) and [Ariel Chart International Literary Journal](#), and was a finalist in the [WOW Q2 '23 Essay Contest](#). She’s taken courses, attended festivals, and talked with fellow memoirists by Zoom but resolves to be in-person with other writers in 2023!

Judge’s Comments: The writer tackles an important issue with dynamic writing, solid empathy, and an appreciation of life’s most important decision, stated in the first sentence - “They’ve figured out how to make us live longer, but they haven’t figured out why.” The writing carried me along, with the narrator’s clear-headed depiction of end-of-life questions, mixed with unexpected moments of laughter. No confusion or show-boating - just writing that moved and enlightened.

Why

by Celia Chandler

They’ve figured out how to make us live longer, but they haven’t figured out why. I’m sobered every time I hear my mother say this. She says it every time we speak, followed closely by her latest thinking about whether she should get assessed for a medically assisted death.

Four years ago, my husband, Jack, chose MAiD over the inevitable but unpredictable death his cancer-riddled body was going to provide. At his celebration of life, mom had said to me she’d like the peaceful and dignified death I’d described. It was hard to believe she was interested in dying that day though, as she walked around, unassisted, chatting coherently with family and friends, and being proud of her son-in-law.

The MAiD law used to require a person to have a life-limiting illness and a reasonably foreseeable death. No problem for Jack; cancer had barrelled its way through his body to the point the only eligibility criterion he was at risk of failing was the mental capacity to consent at the time of the injection. Mom wouldn't have qualified four years ago though - there was no condition accelerating her death other than old age but they've loosened the eligibility recently.

She tells me she still walks the halls of her retirement home every day but isn't comfortable outside alone now, not wanting to fall. The decision to get a walker last year at age 94 was the first time she'd shown anything other than grace in the face of age - admitting defeat, she said. It's tough to hear she no longer goes outside. I cringe at the thought of losing my mobility and independence should I live another 38 years. What if they've figured out how to make us live even longer by then? And what will retirement living look like? As a childless widow with much older siblings, I try not to think about how it will be for me. Why will I live?

Maybe part of mom's "why" is finding humour in the minutiae of daily life in the retirement home, stories she recounts with enthusiasm on my first in-person visit in several months.

"My table-mate, Wayne, says 'Mavis has no tits!'"

I'm fairly certain this is the first time mom has said 'tits.' Equally certain that most people have not said it in her presence, she being a proper Englishwoman, right down to her proper English name, Sybil.

She goes on: "So I said, 'Meaning she couldn't breastfeed?'"

I'm smiling behind my mask. While she's declined physically, nothing's affected her wit. She's grinning, knows she's being funny talking about Wayne.

Mom's maskless of course - she's finished taking precautions. In early COVID, she shared my pandemic concerns, likening it to her childhood in wartime England. Indeed, at the beginning, she'd expressed her hope to live another 10 years to see "how it all works out." But now she looks at me thinking, what's the point? A few times lately she's declared she's kind of done, as justification for MAiD, no longer interested in seeing how we rebuild the world from the last three years. If she gets COVID it wouldn't be the end of the world given her existential views of late, but despite that, I couldn't live with myself if I were the one to give it to her. So I've masked up, knowing that without seeing my lips, she struggles to hear everything I say but hoping my eyes convey my amusement at her stories. Seeing and sharing the absurdity of life is one DNA strand we share.

I'm pleased to hear she managed to divert the conversation with Wayne from something as unseemly as 'tits' to a reference to lactation. I would expect nothing less from a dairy farmer's widow. Lactation was the subject of many dinner table conversations as I grew up, although rarely about human breastfeeding. Mom is from the formula generation.

"To be honest, his comment about his wife's breasts was a welcome break. Mostly Wayne is fixated about things 'below the belt.' He wears shorts every day of the year! And sometimes there are bits dangling." We shudder in unison at that image. Another DNA strand we have in common is a dash of prudishness. "I drew the line though at the day he peed on the floor under the table. My shoes were dry and the wheels of my walker just escaped it. But really." She shakes her head. "I asked to be moved."

"Does Wayne sit alone now?" I inquire, curious about the politics of leaving the table and what might happen to the pee-er. Would he be left alone swimming in his shame?

"My other former table-mate, Ellen, still eats at Wayne's table. She pays \$25 a meal," mom shakes her head at this wild expense, "to be pushed to the table in her wheelchair." Mom goes on. "Ellen would look first at her meal and then at me with bewilderment and ask, 'Am I supposed to eat this?' I helped her a few times through her dinner. Her dementia is pretty advanced. She shouldn't be living here."

Mom pays a lot of money to live at Oxford Gardens, ostensibly with people who can live independently. Ellen clearly isn't functioning at that level and there simply aren't the staff available to help her, so mom steps in. It's not that mom is caring by nature; it's just the right thing to do. Most residents like Wayne and Ellen have waited too long to move in and are no longer able to enjoy the amenities or be self-sufficient. Mom's proud she's been there since she was a very able 83 year old.

"Talking here with you I've almost forgotten my tingly hands." That's the latest in the decline of Sybil. She did handiwork her whole life, and after dad died 15 years ago, made it her mission to keep us all in knitted socks. She attributes her current hand problems to that. It's not pain - just annoying tingling which prevents her from enjoying the things she once did including easily holding a book or a Scrabble tile. Her doctor's given her wrist splints but they make no difference.

"I told you I went to get cannabis cream, right? Yeah, it doesn't help."

"Yup, you told me." I smile behind my N95 again as I recall the story. She's sacrificed independence in so many ways but has found other ways to function on her own. She Googled 'cannabis stores' in her town and then arranged for the retirement home car to take her. She went into the store by herself to consult with the 'very helpful girl' behind the counter. Eventually curiosity drove the driver to join her inside. I'm sure he chuckled in the car as she maneuvered her walker purposefully through the doors of Tokyo Smoke. He likely had a bet with the Oxford Gardens front desk about what Sybil was getting up to this time. How disappointing - only hand cream! It's hard to imagine anything other than physical decline for mom at this point. Still, I admire her confidence that there is any hope of this improving. It's odd at the same time, given her MAiD ruminations.

I take advantage of the pause in the flow about how rotten aging is to inquire about Gertrude. Wayne is not mom's only former table-mate. Stories of Gertrude were common phone-fare for the last couple of years. Gertrude ditched mom - or as mom prefers to tell it, mom drove Gertrude away - a month ago. Theirs was not a good match. Among other ways she verbally chafed at mom, she was prone to pushing religion. Mom's proud she's marching towards death - metaphorically now - without any expectation of what lies ahead. This is unlike many of her fellow OG residents who have renewed their acquaintance with faith to "hedge their bets," as mom says.

"Oh, Gertrude sits at the table next to my new table. But she won't speak to me. I understand she has dementia now too." Knowing she still has all her marbles fully accounted for is another point of pride for mom. It frustrates her too since it means she has fewer and fewer residents she can talk to about matters of life and death, history, healthcare, the fate of the world - things that matter to mom.

"I'm seeing my doctor this week," she says after a brief silence. "It's the first discussion."

I know what she's talking about. She'd gotten my full attention in a phone call earlier this year when she announced she was seriously considering MAiD. It simmers below the surface of every conversation now, emerging at times.

"I don't know if my doctor can do an assessment, but seeing him this week is a start."

Mom and I have talked about the changes in the law so she knows there's a chance she's eligible but over the last few phone calls, I've reminded her of the remaining criterion for MAiD that could be a hurdle for her: eligibility requires an irremediable condition resulting in intolerable suffering. I'm not sure it's sunk in.

"So, mom, if the doctor asks 'how are you suffering,' what will you say?"

"I'm not suffering," she replies indignantly. Women like mom don't admit to suffering.

"Well, he won't be able to deem you eligible then," I reply a bit too sharply frustrated that I'll always be a teenager in her eyes, not a middle-aged lawyer with first-hand MAiD experience. And then I hurriedly

continue with my legal disclaimer, “I’m not coaching you, I’m just giving you information.” I’m scared I’ll somehow be held responsible for influencing her. It’s a ridiculous thought though - no-one has ever influenced my mom.

“I’ll talk about my hands. They’re damned annoying. Perhaps that’s suffering.”

“Good luck.” I don’t know if that’s the right thing to say. I don’t even know how I feel about mom’s impending death. I absolutely agree she should have the right to die, though, if she’s ‘done.’ “I’m happy to do whatever you need to make this happen if it’s what you want. Scratch that, mom, happy’s the wrong word. I will do whatever you want.”

I mean it. I hope I’m as organized about and comfortable with my mortality. I’m proud of this old bird who questions the meaning of life and who wants control over its end. She will ruminate a little more but I know she wouldn’t be saying it aloud if she wasn’t serious. I know, because decisiveness is another DNA strand we share.

...

LITERARY CRITICAL WRITING

Judge: Shaun Hatton

Shaun Hatton is a multidisciplinary artist, perhaps best known for his television appearances as a pop culture journalist and critic. His reviews of film, music, and video games have been published in Popshifter, Toronto Thumbs, GameSugar, and more. Hatton spends much of his free time reading, thinking, and appreciating the beauty of the universe.



Shaun Hatton



John Pringle

SECOND PLACE: John Pringle

John Pringle has self-published five books of short stories and will be distributing his sixth collection "The Song in the Spruce" this spring. Although the themes of his tales are wide-ranging, they are often set in northwestern Ontario, featuring colourful characters both young and old. He is a long-time member of NOWW and the Thunder Bay Writers Guild. Recently retired, he has more time to write, read, fish, grow vegetables and be defeated in cribbage almost daily by his partner Catherine. His favourite part of the day is morning coffee, followed by a long walk with their dog, Fen. This summer he will be selling books at various markets around the region.

Judge’s comments: This critic’s writing was a pleasure to read. Their sentences spring from the page in a colourful, energetic, and convincing argument for *The Passenger*, and although some plot points may be spoiled, this serves as juicy bait to seek out and read this McCarthy gem.

The Passenger by Cormic McCarthy

by John Pringle

A quote on the back cover of *The Passenger* states, “McCarthy puts most other American writers to shame.”

After reading *The Passenger* I would omit the word ‘American.’

Along with its coda, *Stella Maris*, this novel entangles pivotal events of the past eighty years into the life and associates of Bobby Western, a salvage diver, a former racing car driver and student of quantum physics. Western and his sister, Alice, hail from a father who worked on The Manhattan Project and a mostly absent Jewish mother. Their grandparents are ensconced in the back country of Tennessee where uranium 235 was enriched. Bobby’s friends are colourful misfits, brilliant refugees of the American dream. Each of these have their often comical cameo moments as a sinister plot unfolds around a missing passenger from a recently sunken airplane in the gulf of Mexico where Bobby and his buddy ‘Oiler’ dive.

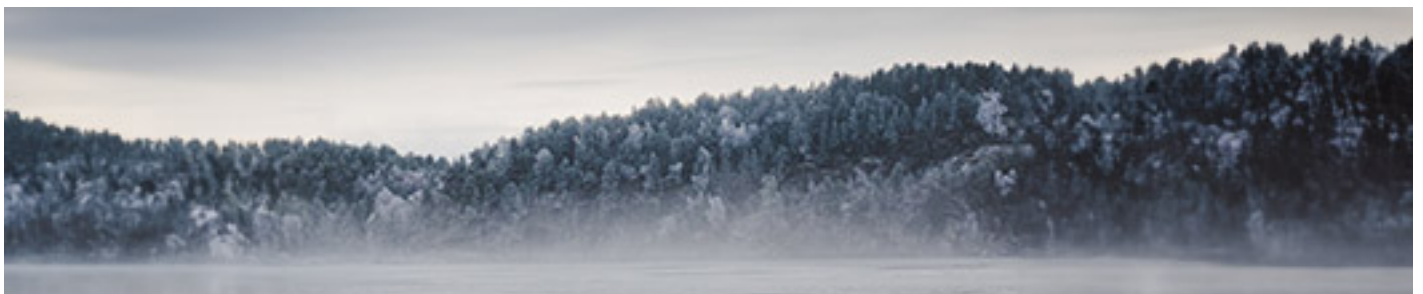
Unknown forces close in and murder Oiler. Bobby flees New Orleans for his life. His apartment is pilfered, bank accounts suspended, his grandparents’ home robbed. Did his father’s political beliefs affect all of this? What had his father done? The Cold War, the Red Scare, the Bay of Pigs, J. Edgar Hoover, the Kennedy assassination.... Nothing is ruled out, nothing is solved.

Woven into the narrative is the tragic life and death of Alice. The book opens with her suicide, and we gradually glean that she took her life ten years past, mistakenly believing her brother to be brain dead following a racing car accident. Alice is schizophrenic, and her hallucinogenic dialogues run italicised throughout the story. Her voices are a cast of actual characters, led by the diminutive, wise cracking ‘Thalidomide Kid’. About three feet high, flippers for arms, he and his pals alternately berate, entertain and encourage Alice. Early on, we learn that brother and sister were, and still are, in love. An incestuous yearning on Alice’s part, yet never consummated.

So McCarthy has thrown the kitchen sink into this one, and I’m tempted to edit out the most arcane passages on mathematics and physics. Ultimately, he presents numbers and language as futile attempts to understand God’s design, no matter how brilliant our scientists and theologians are. Madness, love, and theories become relative concepts, and his conclusion, perhaps, is that ‘God’ is “only interested in our silence.” In a previous McCarthy novel a character dreams that we are here to act upon what is given, and that is all. I believe that if Cormac McCarthy has a defining theosophy it would be that. But I could be mistaken.

This is a brilliant book, ranking with his best. If this is his last effort he may seal the envelope and rest on his laurels. If you haven’t read this master, you have a feast of fine literature to enjoy. It may be a dark ride at times, but acts of kindness, wit and humour provide balance and enough light for this reader.

...



SHORT CRIME FICTION

Judge: Elisabeth de Mariaffi

Elisabeth de Mariaffi is the critically acclaimed author of three previous books: the Scotiabank Giller Prize-nominated short story collection *How to Get Along with Women* (2012), the literary thriller *The Devil You Know* (2015), and the 1950s-era Hitchcock-style thriller, *Hysteria* (2018), both of which were named *Globe and Mail* Best Books of the year, and shortlisted for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph, and has taught fiction at UBC, Memorial University, and through the Humber School for Writers. Her newest novel, *The Retreat*, about a dancer who must separate truth from lies in order to survive a deadly storm at a remote mountain arts retreat, hit bookstores in July of 2021. Elisabeth makes her home in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.



Elisabeth de Mariaffi



Willow Healy

SECOND PLACE: Willow Healy

Willow Healy has lived, traveled, and worked all over the world. She uses her experiences and adventures in Japan, Nepal, Tibet, Germany, and Canada as a source of inspiration to write novels set in faraway lands and populated with memorable characters.

Judge's comments: An ex-FBI art forgery specialist plays investigator in this inventive and interesting murder story. The protagonist in "One Hundred Million Shades of Colour" is not only an art forgery specialist by training, she has a genetic one-up, as well: a tetrachromat, she is able to see colours that most other people cannot. This ability helps her to solve the crime in this unique procedural that uses lots of real-life forensic and investigative tools to create realism and draw the reader into the heart of the mystery.

One Hundred Million Shades of Color

by Willow Healy

Art is my passion, my career, my life. As a former member of the F.B.I.'s art crime team, I was one of two women working on forgeries. I honed my craft until I could tell a Gustaf Klimt from an Egon Schiele, a real Giacometti from the forger Robert Dreissen, and became the go-to person on Monets. I authenticated two Picassos discovered in a grandmother's attic and had warned a client against buying an iffy Basquiat. Although I miss the security of my F.B.I. salary, I wouldn't change being an independent appraiser for anything.

I rode the brake pedal hard down the 405 freeway on my way to Carmen's in Beverly Hills. I had an appointment with the gallery owner, Paul Hendricks, who wanted me to authenticate two Jackson Pollock paintings. I'd worked with Paul before and hoped to get more jobs, so the last thing I needed was to look unprofessional by arriving late. Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel in frustration, I turned on a classical music station to soothe me. Instead, I got The Ride of the Valkyries.

I arrived hot, frazzled, and slightly late for the appointment. I reached behind for my briefcase, containing tools of the trade: cotton gloves, a magnifying glass, camera, and my iPad. The art gallery was large, high-end, and situated in an Art Deco building with geometric-designed stone panels at the entrance. One had to be well-heeled to buy anything in this place. I rang the bell next to the glass door and was buzzed in by the receptionist. Instantly a welcome blast of cold air enveloped me. The six-foot-two receptionist greeted me. "Hi Rebecca. "

"Hi, Sheila."

Sheila stood over a stack of mail she was about to sort. Resting on top was a postcard of the iconic Sydney Opera House. She took a moment to read the back of the card, smiled, then pointed her black manicured nails to the northwest corner of the main gallery where Paul, my contact, stood with two other men. The gallery hadn't officially opened for the day, so there were only the five of us. The gallery was about the size of a large dining room and within the main building were two smaller gallery spaces consisting of modular walls. Typically, Carmen's would feature three artists, two in the smaller rooms, and the more important artist in the larger main room.

Paul stood near two paintings propped up against the wall next to the cleverly concealed storage room door, which typically held paintings for the next exhibit. The entrance to the storage room seemed to be a continuation of the wall itself, until you pressed it in the right place, and it swung open.

With his conservative haircut and tailored navy-blue suit, Paul radiated a banker's trustworthiness. Because I'd worked with him before, I knew how sincere he was. He was talking to a grey-haired man in a teal polo shirt and khakis pants ironed to knife-pleated perfection. The grey-haired man was gesturing to one of the paintings.

Another guy, all muscle and wearing black, stood just out of listening range from the other two men. As I entered, Muscles eyed me suspiciously, so I eyed him back. "Who is that guy who looks like a pro wrestler?" I asked, Sheila.

"Body-guard to the man talking to Paul."

"Should I wait until they're finished?"

"Paul said to join them as soon as you arrived."

The main room had a solo show of an up-and-coming artist whose abstracts were reminiscent of my favorite painter, Gerhard Richter. The artist was well-known for using tar from the La Brea tar pits or coffee grounds as his medium. I would have liked to linger, but ignored the art and made a beeline to where Paul stood. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Muscles tense as I approached, then relax when Paul extended his hand for me to shake. "Good to see you, Rebecca. Mr. Rolf, Rebecca Francisco is one of our most valued art appraisers. I wanted her to authenticate your canvases. Mr. Rolf has brought in paintings that he either wants to sell here or put up for auction."

Mr. Rolf and I examined each other. His expensive-looking haircut couldn't quite hide his hair transplant, and he over-did the after shave. I gave him my winningest smile and set my briefcase down. He didn't smile back.

I have a master's degree in art history from La Chancellerie des Universites de Paris, and a masters in art conservation from Italy, but that wasn't the only reason Paul wanted me here. I have a genetic anomaly that helps in my work.

The paintings, were in Pollock's drip style. One was mostly swirls and drips of brown, grey, black, the other predominately red, brown, blue and black.

"Do you have paperwork to prove provenance?" I asked. Having background information helps to inform me if I have a question about a painting's authenticity. If genuine, the Pollacks were worth tens of millions. David Geffen had sold one recently for 140 million. No wonder Mr. Rolf brought a bodyguard.

"Yes," Mr. Rolf said, answering my question about provenance. "These paintings belonged to my business partner, Frank McCardle. His grandmother, Lola, was a friend of Pollock, well, actually more than a friend. This smaller one was hers. Frank told me that she and Pollock were lovers." He reached into his pocket. "Here is a photo of them together."

I saw two people standing close, giving each other intimate smiles. I wondered how long they'd been lovers and what caused their break up.

"I have a copy of a letter from Pollock gifting the painting to her. The other, Frank bought at a later date."

Paul seemed confused. "Earlier you used the words belonged to. He no longer owns them?"

Mr. Rolf looked down and wiped his eyes. "Tragically, Frank died three weeks ago from gunshot wounds."

"Oh! How awful," Paul said.

"They found his body in his car, but the police think he was killed elsewhere."

Paul looked suitably shocked. "I take it they haven't found the killer or killers?"

"Not yet. Frank was such a great partner and friend. He'll be truly missed. I hope the police nail the guy who did it. Frank usually carried a lot of cash. When they found the body, he had no money on him, and his lucky gold coin was also missing. Police think it was a robbery gone bad."

Paul pressed his hands together and became businesslike. "Have you the power of attorney to sell these paintings?"

"Yes." Mr. Rolf glanced at his diamond studded Rolex. "Four weeks ago, Frank asked if I'd keep the paintings temporarily. His home didn't have the top-notch security that mine does.

"Why would he hang the Pollack's in his home if it wasn't that secure?" Paul asked.

"He didn't. Until four weeks ago, Frank stored them in his bank vault as an investment. He brought them to me to bring to you for an appraisal because he needed money for a real estate deal. I worried about having such valuable art around, so hired Rick two weeks ago for protection. As long-time real estate partners and friends, Frank and I made a bargain: in my trust, if I died first, he'd inherit my classic car collection, and in his trust I'd inherit the Pollock paintings. Frank's kids would get his real estate portfolio. I assured him, if he needed to, I had no problem with him selling the paintings. I'll bring a copy of his will and other documentation, if I decide to sell here." He glanced again at his Rolex.

Paul nodded to me. Time to get to work. I took out and put on a pair of white cotton gloves from my briefcase, then began to study the purchased painting. The signature seemed authentically Pollock's. The date was 1950, which was at the height of his drip paintings, and the canvas was age appropriate. I knelt, and with my naked eyes examined it more closely. The black drips in the lower left quadrant almost obscured a few blue drips underneath. The barely visible paint was International Klein Blue. I stood up. "Mr. Rolf, are you familiar with the painter, Yves Klein?"

“No,” he answered, with a look of frustration. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Klein invented an intense blue color, patented in 1960. The date on the painting is 1950, I’m sorry to say, this couldn’t possibly be a Pollock.”

“What! I don’t believe it. There are no blue drips.”

I pointed them out.

“That’s black,” he argued after inspecting it.

“The top layer is black, and although it’s microscopic, there is blue underneath.” I went back into my briefcase and pulled out my magnifying glass and handed it to him.

“Okay, I see a little blue, but it could be any blue,” he insisted.

“Let’s return to this a little later. There are additional tests we can do,” I soothed. I didn’t use the f-word, forgery. Too negatively loaded.

I knelt again and began to study the second piece, the grandmother’s gift painting when something unusual caught my eye. I focused on the upper right quadrant where there were primarily reds and browns. I squinted, then swallowed hard. Was I really seeing what I thought I was?

I mentally added up Mr. Rolf’s timeline. The paintings had been in a bank vault until Mr. Rolf received them four weeks ago; Frank McCardle died three weeks ago. The bodyguard was hired two weeks ago. I rose with a sense of shock and disbelief. The evidence was there, if you just looked.

“Well?” Rolf asked, after popping a piece of gum into his mouth.

I slapped a smile on my face, suppressed my emotions, all the while trying to figure out what to do next. “The good news is this appears to be a genuine Pollock. The colors are true to the period; the overall style is right. You have the letter to Lola and the photo of them together, so yes, it is a Pollock. Paul can better speak to its current value.”

I bent down for my camera and iPad in the briefcase. After I’d taken a number of photos, I said. “Excuse me, I won’t be a moment, but I’d like to enter some data while it’s still fresh in my mind for the report.”

Paul nodded. I left them discussing pricing and doing further analysis of the suspect painting.

I strode over to the reception desk while texting my cousin, Stanley, aka Tank, so named by his college football coach for his ability to mow down the opposition.

Please, please, I thought, be on duty. “Tank, are you on patrol?”

“Yeah, Becca, I’m wearing my blues today. Waasup?”

“I need a huge favor. Can you come to Carmen’s Art Gallery, asap?”

“Doug and I will be right over. What’s going on that’s so urgent?”

I ignored his question and asked, “Does the department have a Raman spectroscopy unit?”

“Becca, this is the Beverly Hills Police Department, we have everything but a quantum computer. What’s this about?”

“Could you bring it? I can’t go into it right now because I have to go back to my client. If I’m wrong, my art career is on the line, and my client may lose a huge sale because of me, but I have to know the truth. If I’m right I’m afraid of what will happen.”

I turned to the receptionist. “My cousin, a policeman, and his partner are headed here. I’d like to introduce them to Mr. Rolf.”

Sheila was taken aback. “Policemen? Whatever for? Is it okay with Paul?”

“I’m sure it is,” I answered. “It’s incredibly important. Don’t worry. I’ll take full responsibility.”

Ten minutes later Tank and his partner were buzzed in. Sheila remained at reception working on the computer. I waved the guys over. The bodyguard didn't look happy as he eyed the approaching men in blue. He trailed them to where Paul, Mr. Rolf and I stood.

As Tank and Doug joined us, Paul's face registered total confusion. Mr. Rolf looked stunned, then fearful.

"Okay, Becca, we're here," Tank said.

"What's going on, Rebecca?" Paul demanded.

Five sets of eyes focused on me.

After introducing everyone, I took a deep breath. "It's like this. When I examined that last painting, the grandmother's, I saw something that shocked me." I turned to Paul. "Do you recall Mr. Rolf saying he took possession of the paintings four weeks ago, and before that it had been stored in a bank vault. His partner Frank McCardle died a week later, and it hadn't yet been established where he was murdered?"

"Yes, of course I do. A sad occurrence, but why are the police here?"

I pointed to a section of the painting that was predominantly in browns and reds. "If you look closely, in this large area here, there are recent blood spatters. They have to be Mr. McCardle's. He must have been standing near enough to the painting when he was shot to have the spatters here."

Tank came over and looked. "I don't see any blood."

Mr. Rolf's face turned red. "This woman is stark raving mad. Frank was my best friend. I would have done anything for him."

"Tank, did you bring the Raman spectroscopy unit?" I asked.

"Yes." He brought it out of his bag.

"What is he doing, Rebecca?" Paul asked.

"It's a non-destructive, hand-held device that can identify body fluids, including blood," I answered.

Tank turned it on, then aimed.

"You can't do this to me," Rolf sputtered. "Do you know who I am? This woman doesn't know what the hell she's talking about. There's no blood. I'm taking my paintings and leaving. Rick," he yelled to Muscles, "help me take them."

"Not yet, sir." Tank blocked him. A moment later the machine beeped. "It's blood alright," Tank said. "Mr. Rolf you'll have to come with us for questioning, and we need to take the painting as possible evidence in a murder case. We'll do the DNA testing at headquarters."

The bodyguard elbowed Paul out of the way until he stood face to face with Tank. I watched Muscles' eyes narrow. "Let Mr. Rolf go. I know your Deputy Chief of Police. We served in the Navy together. If you're wrong about this, I'll make sure you're fired."

Doug asked in a faint Texas drawl. "Are you threatening a police officer?"

Tank gave Rick a bored look. "If I'm wrong you don't have to worry."

Muscles stepped back.

Doug turned to me. "How did you know the spatters were there?"

Paul answered before I could. "The reason Rebecca can see them and we can't is because she's a tetrachromat."

Everyone but Paul and Tank stared in bewilderment. Because most people hadn't heard of the term, I explained. "Humans, have three cones in their retina and can see about one million colors. A tetrachromat

like me, has four cones, and can see 100 million shades. I see minute subtleties of color that no one else but another tetrachromat can.”

Paul added, “Just last year, Rebecca pointed out that a rare Heinrich Campendock painting from the early twentieth century, which we were about to sell, was in fact a forgery. We verified her findings by sending the painting out for chemical and electron microscope analysis. She determined that the white color which was used wasn’t right for the era.”

I added. “The white used in that Campendock was titanium, which was patented several years after the date on the painting. It has a different reflexive quality from the others. Seeing subtleties makes me a good art appraiser, and that’s why I could tell the color of blood from the paint.

I passed a pair of white gloves to Tank then rewrapped the Lola’s painting. We watched an angry Mr. Rolf, along with the painting being escorted out the door by Tank and Doug. He shouted, “Rick, call my attorney, his name is Carl Biggs. Have him come down to the station immediately.”

“Sure Mr. Rolf; I’ll get right on it.” He pulled a phone out of his pants pocket.

Paul turned to me ruefully. “So, who knew being a tetrachromat would give you crime- solving abilities and leave me poorer for it. How could you tell the blood is recent?”

“By the color. Also, it had also been in a bank vault, so blood couldn’t have come from there. It had to occur later.”

“What about the bodyguard? He could be the killer. He may have been after McCardle’s cash.”

I shook my head. “Couldn’t be him. He was hired after Mr. McCardle’s death.”

I peeled off my cotton gloves and put them in my briefcase. “Well, at least Mr. Rolf got his wish.”

Paul looked quizzical. “What wish?”

“That the police nail the guy who murdered McCardle.”

...



BILL MACDONALD PRIZE FOR PROSE

Judge: Lauren Carter

Lauren Carter's last novel *This Has Nothing To Do With You* won the Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction from the Manitoba Books Awards, and she also received the John Hirsch Award for Most Promising Manitoba Writer. Her first novel *Swarm* appeared on the CBC Canada Read's longlist. She has also published two poetry collections: *Lichen Bright* and *Following Sea*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph and has taught creative writing across North America and online to students from around the world, including Syria, Qatar, and California. Her fifth book — short story collection *Places Like These* — was just published by Book*hug Press. In April, it was named by the *Globe and Mail* as one of thirty nine fiction and non-fiction books to read this spring.



Lauren Carter



Irene McCuaig

SECOND PLACE: Irene McCuaig

As a retired teacher, Irene spends her days at Inglenook Art Studio in Kenora, which she owns and operates, and her evenings writing (or trying to). Her cat, Ko, shares her creativity by adding her own stamp to Irene's work, which Irene takes with a grain of salt. Her daughter, Erin, is a valued editor and critic and Irene takes her advice more seriously. She is enjoying her foray into flash and short fiction which is an area she would never have considered were it not for NOWW and the support of her Sunday morning writers' group. She is constantly inspired by the people she meets through writing workshops and meetings, be they zoom events or in person gatherings. She is honoured to be chosen as a finalist in this year's competition.

Lauren's comments: Through poetic detail, this story creates an evocative sense of wandering through the night in northern Ontario. It brings to life the wide dark water, the silence, the night sky, the fat moon, the town on the wilderness's edge, through the eyes and experience of a mysterious narrator. A rising eeriness is built, leading to a final turn that satisfies the reader. I appreciated the strong characterization, the building of the story's arc, and especially the confidence of its open ending: what will happen next? Where will the narrator and her companion wander now?

Unfettered

by Irene McCuaig

I grew up, unfettered, in northwestern Ontario. I was a wild thing. Almost feral in my wanderings. I use the phrase 'wild thing' because no one prohibited me anything. I've known children, with too much freedom,

who became villains. Not me. I had everything I wanted. Thievery didn't cross my mind. I was kind by nature. No cats dissected and buried in the backyard. I shudder at the thought.

I didn't have to forage for food. There were always healthy snacks in the refrigerator and unhealthy snacks in the cupboard. I had three square meals per day. Usually communal. I was an only child, given to rambling, but meals were always eaten in the presence of my parents.

My wanderings were innocent. If I awoke in the night and saw huge flakes of snow falling from the blackened sky, no one said, "And where do you think you're going, young lady?" as I donned my parka and headed outside. I'd lie on my back in the woods and watch those flakes materialize from the darkness to tickle my face. If I opened my mouth, occasionally one would land on my tongue, making me laugh.

Sometimes I pulled my toboggan, which I had named Black Jack for a reason I don't remember, to the top of Suicide Hill. I can't adequately describe the thrill of careening, on the edge of control, down a barely-visible pathway, narrowly missing the trees that had given the hill its name. Even in daylight, avoiding the trees was more luck than skill. When I outgrew my toboggan, night-skiing became my hobby. Other than the whisper of skis over packed snow, the silence was absolute. I startled a lynx once, on a full-moon night. It was hidden in shadows but bolted into moonlight with a rabbit in its mouth. I avoided looking at the blood in the snow. Rarely did I meet other skiers. If I did, they paid me no mind as I skimmed past.

I was never afraid. The night was mine.

If I wanted hot chocolate when I got home, I made it. No one said anything about the mug left in the sink or the splashes of water and scattering of cocoa powder on the counter. For me, it was a perfect childhood.

There were fewer people outside on winter nights so they were my favourite. I roamed freely around the neighbourhoods, finding myself better entertained than when I went to the cinema. An amazing number of people don't close their curtains at night. All I had to do was turn my head to see another drama unfolding.

The Clyde baby was a poor sleeper. I watched Mrs. Clyde, pacing the floor, her wailing little one in her arms. I thought about knocking and offering to take the kid sliding to give her a break. Fortunately it was a transient thought as she'd likely assume responsibility for me too and I certainly didn't want that.

I saw Mrs. Johnsen race across her living room and crawl under the coffee table on the far side of the room. She was wearing nothing at all. Looking back on it now, I wonder why my first concern was for her warmth. Surely my first question should have been, "Why is she hiding?" Then I saw Mr. Johnsen, wearing just his pj bottoms, storm into the room and look around. I hoped he wouldn't find her. He looked livid. But she could hardly spend the whole night under the coffee table. When I saw their station wagon in the driveway, I hatched a plan. I let the air out of all four tires, rang the doorbell and ran. My scheme worked perfectly. Mr. Johnsen called the police. His wife was safe for one night anyway.

I was so satisfied with the outcome, I thought about becoming a vigilante, dispensing justice in the quiet hours of darkness. I tried stake-outs a couple of times but it detracted from my sense of belonging to the night. I wasn't meant to be a defender of underdogs. I was simply meant to be.

The aroma of freshly-baked bread became my alarm clock. The baker was at work. It was four a.m. and I was hungry. It was time to go home.

I didn't need the eight hours of sleep that doctors recommend. Never have. I got by at school. Neither the top of the class, nor the bottom. I did my work, content to sit at the back of the room and keep myself to myself. I felt truly alive only when I was wandering in darkness.

I've always felt there is magic in the night. If you need proof of that, think of a skinny dip. The luxurious silk of water gliding over nakedness, the coolness that makes every pore come alive, the tingling awareness

that another creature might be swimming nearby. I'm a floater - one of those fortunate few who can float vertically without moving a muscle. I could tilt my head back and be stunned by the beauty of the stars. So many stars. On nights the lake was calm, they admired themselves in its mirrored surface. I was floating in a galaxy with no visible horizon line between sky and earth. Magic!

I almost fell in love one summer. I was twelve-ish. A perfect age for first love. I met a young man who also lived in the night. We waded, hand in hand, through moonlit waves. We sneaked through dark backyards to find our way into the back of the drive-in movie theatre where we'd sit on a blanket and watch the show. We always went for a swim after the movie, more to wash off the bug repellent than for exercise. Sometimes we'd meet his friends and play 'King of the Field'. Riding into battle on his shoulders, I felt on top of the world.

The night of the harvest moon made me realize how much I was sacrificing for his company. We sat on a rock at the edge of a lake. We were silent, awed by the splendour of an orange moon, huge in its proximity to Earth. We ignored the soprano of mosquitos. He held my hand. I wished he wouldn't. The magic in a moment like this was between me and the moon. His touch forced me to be aware of another. It lessened the moment. Would he be hurt if I pulled my hand away? Would I be able to recover that sense of being one with the world, even if we were no longer touching? Or was his presence sufficient distraction to prevent that feeling? I began to long for my private time.

We walked home hand in hand but something had cracked and dried between us. It was months before I saw him again.

It was coming on fall – crinkled leaves danced in the wind, circling my feet as I walked. Giant inflated pumpkins, witches and goblins decorated yards, tugging their moorings, wanting freedom. It wasn't Halloween...not yet, but it was close. The air seemed thinner as All Hallows Eve approached. I could feel the change.

On that night, I smelled smoke in the air. Not the smell of a pleasant campfire or burning leaves. This was sinister. Oily. I walked on until I came to the charred remains of someone's home. The only people in sight were firemen. Just two. I learned later that their job was to watch for hotspots. The fire had been extinguished but there was a danger of flare-ups. I watched them for awhile. As I turned to go, I caught a glimpse of a child standing behind a blackened beam, one arm clutching a stuffed bunny; the other held a thumb to its mouth. How odd! Not one of the firemen acknowledged the child. No one said, "Hey, what are you doing here? Where did you come from?" No one wrapped a blanket around the kid who had to be cold. No one said, "Where are your parents?"

I couldn't walk away from that, could I? I approached the child who looked frightened to see me at first. He (she?) suddenly squealed with delight and toddled toward me, arms open wide. "Up, up!" With a chuckle I scooped her (pink pj's) and twirled her into the night. She laughed and tucked her soft curls into my shoulder. What a buzz! I was not familiar with children, being an only child, but this one was a treat. I tried to get the attention of the firemen but they were intent on their job so I decided, what the heck, I'd take her home. My parents would know what to do. On the way home, I heard a familiar voice.

"Trying out motherhood?"

I laughed. It was my summer friend, my brief love. "No, she was hanging around that burned house. The firemen were busy so I'm taking her home until morning."

"I see." An odd look crossed his face. Then he said, "Hold on a bit," and walked into the Clyde house. When he returned, he passed me a bag of diapers and a few jars of baby food. "You'll need these."

“Oh, wow. I never thought...thank you.” He was gone.

When we arrived home, the wee one was sound asleep. I did the best job I could on a diaper change and tucked her in beside me. We slept soundly through what was left of the night.

In the morning, I woke to the sound of my parent’s whispered voices. Whispers can be surprisingly loud when everything else is quiet.

“What has she done this time?” That was my father’s voice.

“Where would she get a baby?” That was my mother’s.

“A child died in that fire yesterday.” My father.

Then my mother. “Obviously a child died somewhere. What should we do?”

“Maybe this is a good thing, Sal. If she’s really attached to this child, it might help her.”

“Do you think so?”

“If the time is right...yes, I think so. All Hallows is close.”

“Oh, John. I hope you’re right. I’m so tired.” Her voice faded to nothing.

I stretched to let them know I was awake. I didn’t know how the babe would be able to help me but we needed to help her. “Can we find her parents? She was wandering around by herself.”

I quite enjoyed the next few days of playing mom. I acquired an old stroller and oiled the wheels because the squeaking was spooky, even for me. The child and I walked the nights together.

I’m always drawn to the cemetery on All Hallows. There’s a site there that feels sacred. I suppose all graves are sacred but this spot was particularly awe-inspiring and comforting. We moved through the night, baby and I, past tombstones and bare trees, over leaves that crackled beneath us while the wind whispered in our ears. Baby chortled, as happy with the night as I was.

But wait! Something was happening at my favourite spot. A group of people surrounded the railing, their flashlights looking like giant fireflies as they shuffled about. Ah...a midnight cemetery tour. I’d heard of them but never attended one. Babe and I edged forward until we stood on the fringe. I listened as the leader explained that children were buried here, victims of typhoid fever that had ravaged the community in its early days. Fear of spread of the disease prompted the doctor at the time to insist on immediate burial so the dead were interred in a mass grave. He explained how records were sparse and the children were listed briefly as Baby girl Roberts, boy Moroz, female Martinson, etc. “We don’t know,” he continued, “if the records are complete or how many children are buried here but some folk report the sighting of a young female ghost hovering around this grave.” The group moved on.

I lingered, waiting for the serenity to return. I smiled when I realized that ‘female Martinson’ was my name. A relative, perhaps? I took the babe out of her stroller and snuggled her to me. I looked up. My parents stood at the edge of the grave.

“Mom. Dad? What are you doing here? Were you on the tour?”

Mom started to speak but choked up. Something was wrong. I wasn’t enjoying this encounter at all. Dad put his arm around her and spoke to me. “We’ve decided it’s time for us to move on. We’ve been waiting for you to adjust but it’s been almost one hundred and fifty years and we’re so very tired.”

“What’s been a hundred and fifty years? What?...I don’t understand.”

“Female Martinson.” He pointed to the grave. “Female Martinson is you, my daughter. You died of typhoid, oh so many years ago.” He hugged my mother again. “As did we.” He pointed to a tilted wooden cross, the writing no longer legible. “We died before you. That’s why you were living in a group home when you died and why you’re buried here, in a mass grave. The others have gone on. But you, for some reason, have strong ties to life on this level. We’ve waited for you to be ready so we can cross over together, a family,

but we're too tired now to wait longer." He looked at the child I carried. "This child," he explained, "died in the fire that consumed the building. She had not yet crossed over although she certainly would have if she hadn't seen you first." He and Mom extended arms toward me. "Will you join us now?"

I pondered all this new information as I watched them slowly fade. Suddenly I ran forward and placed the babe in their arms. I watched them disappear and felt momentarily sad. A hand touched my shoulder. I looked into the smiling eyes of my summer friend. "They picked a good night," he said. "All Hallows. Mist. A light breeze. The veil is at its thinnest."

We stood and felt the mist on our faces and heard the music of the night settle around us. "Swim?" he suggested.

...

Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop



LitFest 2024

with Special Guest,
International Bestselling Author
Guy Gavriel Kay



www.nowwwriters.ca

May 10-11, 2024

noww
Northwestern Ontario Writers Workshop