

THE SHUSWAP ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS PRESENTS

WORD FROM THE LAKE

ISSUE #2

SUMMER 2026

FICTION

POETRY

ARTICLES

*The 2026 Word on the Lake Writing
Contest winners for Fiction:*

Annunciation Day
by Jay McKenzie

The Gatekeeper
by Sherry Cassels

Nobody Mourns a Drifter
by Deb Vail

PLUS:

**The 2026 Word on the
Lake Festival in Review**

wordfromthelake@gmail.com

A background image showing a calm lake with gentle ripples, and a range of mountains in the distance under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on this image.

“...I admire and appreciate your hard work.”

“... Hard working-caring as always!”.

**“One word-
EXCELLENT!”**

“...A great place to learn, renew friendships and meet new people, make contacts.”

“I have attended many professional conferences-it is a delight to attend a conference that makes people so welcome. Thankyou.”

“So impressed with the organisers and the sheer mass of what I learned and gained this weekend. Keep up the good work.”

“A most wonderful experience. These past few days have been most inspiring.”

“It is the best weekend of the year for me. I learned something at every session”

“I came on a whim and I am so glad I did. What a wonderful writing community here.”

“My retirement days are brightened by this festival-to attend, to save for..”

“The presenters were great... but it was the people who made it for me.”

“I broke my piggy bank for this! Much anticipated, did not disappoint me! Never does.”

WORD FROM THE LAKE

ISSUE 2 SUMMER 2026



PUBLISHER

SHUSWAP
ASSOCIATION
OF WRITERS

LAYOUT & DESIGN

M. D. JACKSON

CONTRIBUTORS

Shawn L. Bird
Kay McCracken
Deb Dearing Turner
Jay McKenzie
Sherry Cassels
Deb Vail
M. D. Jackson

WORD FROM THE LAKE is a quarterly publication of the SHUSWAP ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS. SAW was founded as a vehicle for organizing the Word on the Lake Writers' Festival.

We offer other events throughout the year to inspire and support writers and readers in the BC interior.

The Shuswap Association of Writers' mandate is to organize events to enrich cultural life in the BC Interior, especially the written and spoken arts.

CONTENTS:

Issue #2

Editorial..... 4

Festivity

Fiction by Shawn L. Bird..... 5

Wild West Revisited

Poetry by Kay McCracken..... 8

The Neurodivergent Quilter

Article by Deb Turner 10

*2026 Word on the Lake Writing Contest
winners for Fiction*

Annunciation Day

Fiction by Jay McKenzie 13

The Gatekeeper

Fiction by Sherry Cassels.....16

Nobody Mourns a Drifter

Fiction by Deb Vail.....20

The 2026 Festival in Review

Article by M. D. Jackson.....24

wordfromthelake@gmail.com

EDITORIAL

Future Festivals

The Shuswap Association of Writers is a medium sized writer's organization based in the beautiful city of Salmon Arm.

The event for which the association is known is the Word From the Lake Writers' and Readers' Festival. This year's festival was, by all accounts, a resounding success.

The reviews from the attendees were overwhelmingly positive and, thankfully, there was enough interest to ensure that there will be another festival in May of 2027.

There will have to be some changes. The venue that this year's festival was held at has, unfortunately, become unavailable for next year, so that will necessitate a change of venue.

Some other changes will be in the number of presenters. There will be a fewer presenters next year than there were this year,

However, the association anticipates that the next festival will still have the same excitement and value as always!



*Hidden Gems
BookStore*
TREASURES FOR YOUR MIND

Beth Phillips

PO Box 1545
331D Alexander St. N.E.
Salmon Arm, BC V1E 4P6

250.833.0011
beth@hiddengemsbookstore.com
www.hiddengemsbookstore.com

EVERYONE HAS OPINIONS.

Maybe you have one about this publication. Let us know.

Tell us what you liked, what you didn't like or what you'd like to see in upcoming issues.

Email us at
wordfromthelake@gmail.com



Festivity

A short story by SHAWN L. BIRD

When Nadia stepped into the carpark and spotted her car, full to the roof with jaunty balloons, she nearly screamed the howl that she'd kept at bay for over a year.

Instead, she bent her knees to lower her centre of gravity as she peered low around the carpark, looking for feet or tell-tale shadows. She strained her ears for the sound of footsteps, the crinkling of clothing, the crunch of gravel. *Not again! How had they found her?*

She reached back to smack at the elevator call button, her heart a thundering drum lodged in her throat. Was there someone over in the southwest corner? Were those whispers to her left?

She would have to call her handler. *What had she done with his card?* The elevator

opened behind her.

She made sure it was empty and backed in.

She hit several buttons as the elevator closed. *Diffuse.*

Which was safer, the lobby or her office? She settled on the lobby. *More people.*

She bolted for the washrooms, trying to see everywhere without alerting anyone to her panic. Blend in. Disappear. The concierge was busy talking to a woman. A family was arguing quietly by the access door to the stairs. Someone with hairy knuckles was reading a newspaper.

Who read newspapers anymore?

She slipped into the washroom, glancing automatically under the stall doors for feet. She pushed the doors. No one. She turned the deadbolt on the door to the lobby. *Safe.*

She could breathe for a moment.

She closed her eyes, knowing what she'd see behind her lids. The children's party. The cake, streamers, balloons, and blood.

Her stomach heaved as it did whenever the image flooded back.

She threw it up and flushed it away.

More images came, from a month with balloons appearing wherever she went: tangled in trees (*surely a grim coincidence?*), tied to her car aerial (*who's doing this?*), and finally floating up from a box opened at work, its grisly note ensuring there was no ambiguity, "You don't want to testify, Nadia Romanova."

But she *did*, because how could she live with herself otherwise? What was there to stay for anymore?

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, jolting her heart back into her throat. She glanced at the message, "Where are you?" It was from Stella, her work colleague. They were supposed to be meeting for drinks.

"Have you ordered yet?" Nadia typed.

"No. I'm just in the carpark. Come down!"

Nadia imagined Stella sliced into little pieces next to that festively filled vehicle and retched again. Nadia hadn't paid much for that car. She could leave it there. She could get a bus pass, never use a carpark again.

2.

"I thought I'd walk," she typed. "Be there in ten." *Or never.*

"Come on!" Stella replied. "There's a surprise here!"

Nadia closed her eyes again. "I hate surprises," she typed back. She could visualize her car: the illuminated interior, the terrifying balloons that meant her life was flipping upside down again.

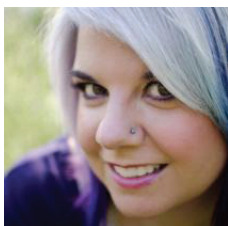
She knew what she should do: Go around the corner to the bank. Take out as much cash as they'd let her have. Take a taxi to the airport. Pick the next flight going anywhere. Disappear. Call her handler when she landed. *What had she done with his card?* Deep breath. *You've done it once. You can do it again.*

Her phone buzzed again. "Fine, Nadia. I'll just tell you. The whole office is waiting down here. We want to celebrate your work anniversary! Suzanne is planning to promote you! COME DOWN!"

Promote me?

Another text arrived: "ACT SURPRISED!"

Nadia stared at the text, crumpled to the floor of the bathroom, and laughed until she wept..



SHAWN BIRD has been in the SAW community since her first novel was in progress back in 2008.



SEPTEMBER 12th, 2026
SPLATSIN COMMUNITY CENTRE
ENDERBY, B.C.

BRINGING AUTHORS, READERS AND WRITERS TOGETHER
FOLLOW ENDERBY LIT-CON ON INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK TO STAY UP TO DATE
QUESTIONS? EMAIL WOVENWORDS.SISTERHOOD@GMAIL.COM



New and used books
Gifts, puzzles, games
Bookish merch
Focusing on
Canadian authors and products

#6-802 George Street
Enderby B.C.
1-250-540-5073
www.thefrayedpage.ca



*the gaze of someone who
loves you*

your household chores

(Submission fee \$5; free to SAW members)

This quarter's poetry form
is the MONOSYLLABIC
QUATRAIN.

Example:

© 2026 Shawn L. Bird

Wild birds call from high

Come with us!

Here I sit

And wish I could.

wordfromthelake@gmail.
com (Submission fee \$5;
free to SAW members)

Wild West Revisited

Poetry by KAY McCracken

Miss Kitty
I liked her
her life
TV life
Gunsmoke
And me just an impressionable girl

She owned the saloon
was friends with the sheriff
good friends
But that was the fifties

No lust, sex, or prostitution,
No smoking, spitting, or lewd remarks
A show my mother would like.

No Indians. No Indians?

Just Miss Kitty
Her independence
Her calm, self-possessed nature
Queen of her realm

So, forty years later I revisit the fantasy
Not a saloon, but a bookstore
complete with espresso bar
Not Miss Kitty, but close enough

Not the Wild West, but small-town BC
where just about anything goes
from placard carrying church goes
to an annual biker stomp

Not a sheriff, but a carpenter
who liked his cappuccino strong
whose tool belt slapped his thighs
when he strode through the doors
Like a gunslinger hunting his prey.

Good morning, Miss Kay, he'd say
Polite, respectful
So far, so good, I thought
ignoring the hunger in his eyes

But in this Wild West
The cowboys came to read poetry
And the Indians weren't Indians
but First Nations, Shuswap, Secwepemc
with roots deep in the land.

They weren't going anywhere
while the carpenter
Hmm, the carpenter
Trickster, Shapeshifter
ravenous for more than just cappuccino
he ran off leaving chaos in his dust

I cried
closed up shop
cursed
and prayed that I got the lesson
prayed for a little less wild in my west next time.



KAY McCracken is the author of two memoirs, as well as numerous poems and short stories, a novel, *Between Two Worlds*, and a novella *No Cure for Longing*. In 2003, Kay co-founded the Word on the Lake Writers' Festival. McCracken wrote this poem to commemorate the "Wild West Revisited" event she organized as a fundraiser for the festival in 2006. Renowned Secwepemc poet Garry Gottfriedson's book *Whiskey Bullets: Cowboy and Indian Heritage Poems* had just been published.



The Neurodivergent Quilter

Article by DEB TURNER

Fabrics, scraps, patterns, threads, everything spreads out on every surface throughout the creative process and beyond. The comfort of being among the ideas and results of all the thought is palpable.

For the majority of my career, I was the sole person on deck in a busy library atmosphere. The need to field questions, run circulation, answer phones, fix copiers and generally keep the peace was every day, at any time of day. Plate spinning and juggling were in my nature, and I'd never spent a lot of time analysing the needs or the costs.

As a parent with three sons, my husband and I juggled their needs and our work schedules to keep them healthy and happy. We ran a home on opposite shifts to have one of us available most of the time. Their giftedness acted as a shield that hid some

of their neurodivergence. Each of them is slightly different but all of them are brilliant in their own way.

High School teaching was the path my middle son took and he soon attended a workshop about ADHD. He told me his ribs were bruised by his partner's elbowing him for all the symptoms he displayed. His self test was significantly high. After testing myself, the similarities were obvious. At the same time, thousands of miles away, his brother was being tested by a psychologist for the same disorder.

While both of them chose to go the medication route to improve their work-life balance, in retirement I chose to work with a counsellor to develop natural coping strategies.

Where does quilting work into this? Creativity in general and quilting in particular are natural antidepressants. The com-

fort of creating and moving forward to a positive end creates brain chemicals that help to settle the hyperactivity and slow the plate spinning to a gentler rhythm. The flow state resulting from creative arts is equivalent to medication without the side effects.

This is not to say there are not challenges including obsessive behaviour and unrealistic expectations as well as the need for, and difficulty in, organising projects. There are elements of plate spinning and juggling involved that are challenging to keep at bay. The mental effort to balance creativity and organization can be frustrating but rewarding

when it all comes together.

As time passes, the easiest solution for me is to continue the commitment but decrease to size of the projects. Continuing to work on smaller slower projects allows them to be more portable and integral to daily life. Hopefully the dopamine will still be a result of the work, and the relaxation will keep the ADHD until control.

The last and greatest challenge is to keep things out of reach of a curious puppy who also seems hyperactive by nature. We are becoming each other's emotional support partner.



DEBRA DEARING TURNER is part of an old local family and has lived here most of her life. Trained as a teacher-librarian, she returned to live and raise her family. Working with students at the local college for many years honed her writing and editing skills but quilting is her creative passion.

We carry new books, jigsaw puzzles, greeting cards, magazines, calendars, toys and many other odds and ends.

The MALL at PICCADILLY
1151 10 Ave SW, Salmon Arm, BC
www.bookingham.com

BOOKINGHAM PALACE

Lost on a path with many twists and turns a young wanderer explores the forks in the road in these five true stories.

LOST
by Kay McCracken
in local bookstores now

SHUSWAP WRITERS' GROUP
and COFFEE HOUSE

For more information visit:
shuswapwritersgroup.weebly.com or contact
us at shuswapwritersgroup@gmail.com

Murray Metherell
REALTOR

SERVING YOUR AGRICULTURAL & RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE NEEDS

Annunciation Day

Fiction by JAY MCKENZIE. *First place fiction winner of the 2026 Word on the Lake Writer's Contest.*

Marla, who isn't Marla, has stolen things. Today she stole things. Tomorrow she will steal more things, but the dishevelled topknot, the pretty shoulders, are a distraction and so she can walk away with a bag full of quinoa without being challenged. She wears shoes, so she isn't as obvious as the others. She wears a half-halo smile that finds its way into soft dreams.

But even Marla, who last week was Tee-na, knows that stealing a square of land will take more than an elegantly exposed collar bone.

She is specific in her needs: it must be isolated but not too isolated, have trees but not too many trees, be tucked away behind another block, or a driveway or a garage, but not so as it looks like it is trying to be hidden.

And she needs the space to build something that will reach for the heavens.

Marla, who remembers herself with a

different name, has roamed this town and found what she is looking for. This place has a transient, self-congratulatory population who come here to find themselves and leave in a new skin. Just what she needs. She finds a quiet street, no pavements, just grass separating the properties from the road. Tall gums shade neat blocks, and at the end, round a sympathetic bend is a rectangle of grass and twigs begging for Marla or someone with a different name to build a treehouse on it.

Marla, whose belly distends into a gentle convex, whispers *I will build you a house in the sky. Raise it up, as close to the stars as we can be. Just you, I, and the Dark Emu sharing prayers and space and the thinning oxygen of the up there.*

Scattered in the dirt are the bodies of fallen gumnuts. They remind Marla of eggs and she thinks of the way the spring magpies would take on a dragon if needs be to defend their nests. Before she was

Marla, they used to terrify her. Now, she extends her arms and imagines she is one of them.

Stealing the land is easier than she thought it would be. Like a boxed salad or a jar of tea in the General Store, she simply takes it. *See how I reached?*

Marla hires a handyman who thinks her name is Jessie. He has rough fingers and meaty hands and shows no interest in why Jessie needs a treehouse or where the deeds are. He brings the lumber on site with a nod and gets to work while Marla steals paint from the Mitre 10. The neighbours — renters all — are glad that the block has sold. *They'd overpriced it, says one. Didn't think they actually wanted to sell!* Marla, who has told the neighbour that her name is Lina, nods politely when the neighbour says, *We sort of keep ourselves to ourselves round here.*

When the handyman is finished, Jessie hands him a fat wedge of notes swiped from a box on the neighbour's window ledge. He mumbles something about being careful on the ladder and indicates her belly as though giving directions to someone that he hopes will get lost. Marla hurries him off site so that she can admire her nest.

It is barely visible from the ground. The handyman has tucked the blondewood boards neatly under the canopy about ten feet off the ground and Marla is certain that the goannas would only be able to find it at a push. The climb is not difficult either. The ladder is sturdy and tethered at both the platform and the ground. She wonders if perhaps she should have left the low end unsecured so that she could pull it up like a drawbridge. Around the balcony of the treehouse, the high railings that she'd asked for and a gate that can only be opened by the dexterous and the clever.

On that first night, Marla wraps herself in blankets stolen from the Place of Welcome session at the church hall, her only

witnesses a blind organist and a judgemental wooden Jesus. She strokes her belly and waits for the sky to move so that she can see the Dark Emu.

Did you know, little one, that the Dark Emu isn't really a constellation? He is the space between the stars, a crevasse where secrets can be held and kept under the bird-man's beady eye.

It is not Marla's original name that is on her lips as she tips softly into sleep. Nor any of the names she has tried on since leaving Gabe. It is not even Gabe's name, though she is wearing that deep in her body where an egg cracked and swallowed his heart-beat. No. It is the name of the boy. Gabe's boy. Samson. His name a perfect marriage of letters to wrap a forked tongue around.

The boy is a golden, beautiful thing, like an apple hanging between branches, a series of orbs. Cheeks, shoulders, knees. Everything rounded and soft. She had loved him first, before she'd even tried to love Gabe. While she and Gabe were still tumbling around in Eden-fuelled lust, she'd sliced off a bit of her heart and handed it to the boy.

Samson.

She whispers his name in the dark and wonders if he can hear it above the hiss and static of the distance between them. She wonders if he still plunges his hand into the toy chest stuffed with plushies and threadbare teddies, or whether he approaches with a caution unbeknown to most three-year-olds.

Smothered beneath the heartbreaking pathos of a toy chest stripped of its innocence, she bites back a sob and it comes out as a *sssss*.

Buttery morning light slithers through the meurtriére, and for a moment, she thinks someone is calling her name. She lets herself imagine that Gabe has come to find her, Samson's little hand tucked in his, and although she can never let them

see her again, she pictures herself watching them from the treetop. It's just a postman, though. Not even a name he called, but a greeting, indifferent as a preposition. Marla, who isn't Marla, wonders if she is imagining so hard because she doesn't entirely want to let go of the old names that she's left behind, scattered on a pavement like breadcrumbs, pecked clean by hungry birds.

In the General Store she steals an orange. She scratches her thumbnail along the skin, releasing the oil. She sniffs her thumb while she looks for something more substantial to steal, but she is suddenly desperate to liberate the flesh from its skin and she leaves with just the orb pushed deep in her pocket.

At the base of her tree, she removes the skin in one satisfying piece. She lays the orange-and-white twist around the root, remembering something about snakes hating limonene. If only she'd known that then. She eats the fruit slowly, picturing the vitamin-rich juice sliding down and reaching the baby. *For you, little one*, she says, as she still hasn't picked out a name.

When she first guessed what was going on in her body, she tried out names in her mouth, names that would complement Samson. *Sage. Shiloh*. Soft, beautiful names that would slip over a breeze and intermingle with their brother's. But after the toy chest, she has decided that this child will have a defensive name. Something hard, like Kit or Nick or Parker. Strong, straight letters that can't slip between the fangs of an eastern brown or a coastal taipan.

An eastern brown got into the toy chest, slid his tongue across the unvoiced fricatives of Samson's name, and tried to

claim him for itself. Marla, who was not Marla, was there and she saw it, the horror of something as thin as an onion skin separating us from slipping through the cracks in the universe. She saw Samson's life leave, just for a second, like a foggy winter's breath, and so she stuffed it back in and tossed him into the back seat of the car.

She pauses midchew, closes her eyes. If there was a way to go back, she'd nail that cat-flap shut, burn the teddies, seal the windows, float that old farmhouse up to the clouds.

He is fine. Was fine when she left, antivenom battling the poison in his blood. Fine, but altered, like he slid out of his little baby skin that day and into his future self. Marla, who was somebody else then, left him there at the hospital waiting for his father to arrive while she slipped out of her name and into another. In the car, she tried out a few, but settled on Carrie. *Carry me away*.

Marla, who was once Carrie and has been many more people besides, pushes the last segment of orange into her mouth and wonders if orange peel will burn. Tomorrow is March 25 — Day of the Annunciation — and she can almost feel the ground rolling with the movement of snakes ready to come out of their holes. It is folklore, yes, but Marla who has worn many other names recently needs to do everything right this time. In the morning, she will light a fire on the beach, leap over it, scorching her heels so that the snakes won't bite. Then she'll climb back to her nest to shed that last skin, and beneath, she will be Mother.



The Gatekeeper

Fiction by SHERRY CASSELS. *Second place fiction winner of the 2026 Word on the Lake Writer's Contest.*

Seven Bells

They are studying homelessness at the high school, that's what the kid said, as if it's a thing on a petri dish, a common noun, or a mechanical device.

He spoke through the fence from where he stood on the sidewalk. The street was quiet, he wasn't dressed for the weather, he was shivering, first week of November you need more than a school blazer.

In white words, he asked if I'd help him with his project.

Mine was the only fire going, light was just sparking up between the buildings on one side and the trees on the other. I could have said anything back to him, or nothing at all, I could have told him to get lost and I might have, but just then a grapefruit flew between us like a breakneck sun.

It came from Saint Rose, *I'd rather get scurvy*, she yelled. She's such a pirate.

The kid said some idiot in his class probably gave her the fruit as a bribe. He said

everybody wanted to interview Saint Rose.

I told the kid to tell his friend that Saint Rose preferred her fruit fermented.

Seven bells pealed. He looked in their direction with interest, he sort of absorbed them, and when they quieted he said it again, earnestly through the fence as if I hadn't heard the first time, *We are exploring homelessness.*

I shrugged and said, *Me too.*

Project's due tomorrow.

Don't they teach you anything? — my words also white. Tomorrow never comes.

He asked if I would keep a diary of my day, and again I could have said anything, nothing, a pomegranate flew by. I reached for the bag he offered and placed it on the ground in front of me.

Thank you, I'll be back same time tomorrow.

There was a shake in his voice like residue from the seven bells he had swallowed, or perhaps he was just nervous.

Something else went by, similar to a lime but probably an avocado, it hit my retreating student in the shoulder, and fell to the ground a pear.

There's a church you can see from here, with a bell tower. Looks like it belongs on a crumbling coast somewhere, maybe the cliffs above the rough-rubbed shores of Ireland, its white brick and sandstone walls absorbing the light, maybe some sins, it glows.

We used to pile into its paupers' cemetery at night, we'll end up there anyway so not really *trespassing* like they said, more like *practicing*. But they have made it inhospitable, armrests have been installed on the benches denoting individual seats. They prevent us from lying down but give the impression of portioned-out generosity.

Little bright bulbs like falling stars but grapes, a galaxy of them, land at my feet. The idiot who wanted the interview with Saint Rose pelts by, I say *thanks for the grapes* to her shape, they are cold and hard and sweet.

Things are starting to change here. It's like the depiction of dawn in a musical, all the tents open at once and people stretch and yawn from them, some bolt, there's an incohesiveness, a chaos that looks like it could snap into something choreographed. Gloria at the edge of the forest fencing with her umbrella, one-handed Marcus in a warrior two variation, a few others pushing and pulling, something of a rhythm comes, fires are lit, and here we are, in the combined glow of morning.

Somebody shouts out their madness, somebody else says, *shut up Harry*.

Such is life in Trinity Park, where tomorrow comes every single day to those of us who thought it never would.

Nine Bells

Here beneath the clouds, I am Trinity's gatekeeper. The criteria for admission are

somewhat arbitrary, but for denial they are precise.

We feel time in our bones, the peal from the cathedral is the widest in North America, peal is measured in distance rather than decibels, the way I measure devils by their reach.

At nine bells, dawn is over and we are looking for something else. The alcohol and drug seekers lurch away, other groups or couples fray, the rest of us go it alone, our searches individual. Mine is to find my *self* — the one who is courageous, whose heart beats with ferocity, who would have been a playwright — for it is this self to whom I trust my residue, mine own gatekeeper, the one who stores what is necessary and lets the rest go.

This life has few comforts, the daily discovery of this self is one. Poetry seeps in already, for make no mistake, we are all poets, we homeless in Trinity Park.

Where do you think your gatekeepers rest?

Twelve Bells

I would have been a playwright.

Something like: A single beam of light on a size seven sweater hangs on the back of a chair in a hollow room. The owner of the sweater is missing. Her mother, by the window's early light, picks the sweater up, sits in the chair, threads a needle, and stitches along the sweater's edges. The turquoise thread melts into the turquoise wool, the sweater is now a poor fit, her daughter's delicate wrist bones rise like stones from the final row of knit-one-pearl-two stitches. She tries to remember if her daughter mentioned a double sleepover, she looks down the road watching for the girl to come to her like thread through a needle.

We time, we count — will the body before ours be the final to cascade into the cathedral ground? When will they say *when*? We count cigarettes and coins, clouds, birds, we count empty bottles,

years, and we count the bells, we believe we are for whom they toll, we hope there is room for one more, we are neither -full nor -less, hope's proportions are various as the clouds, the starlings that give, at this time of year, shape to the sky.

One Bell

There is a woman who says, *I am so far away from home*, into the space between her and everyone who passes. The words travel through the fence, she says it in the same way others ask for spare change. She makes the office girls with their shoes and handbags think of home, their ageing mothers who iron in the next room, the window through which sheep sway over knitted green fields, their father's miniature shape seems to stride along the windowsill.

Trinity Park is not entirely fenced in. We have 180 degrees of free forest that tumbles into a ravine, after which the birch rise again and thin. For a few flat miles only grass rolls, and then railroad tracks — show me a homeless heart that is not stirred by the whistle of a train — and then Lake Superior. We know of its wildness but see no evidence, from here it looks contained under glass. Impossibly gigantic ships appear, one wonders how they stay afloat, the office girls who walk along the sidewalk on the other side of the fence feel the same about the old men who gaze at these ships as if lending them buoyancy, they wonder how the men stay alive.

Nocturnal Matik yells in her sleep, her teepee in full sun now, she pleads for a canoe. Every night she tells the same fireside tale of when she was forced into a boat that took her from her home on the reserve to assumed safety. Her mother yelled from the shore for her to sit backwards and memorize the way, this was Lake of the Woods, brimming with islands. Matik says even now she could get home if only

she had a canoe, that the islands are fixed behind her eyes, when she walks, she paddles.

There is a knot of women who gather at one bell upon a picnic bench that has been burned in the centre. They are the trolls at our gates, my helpers — they keep the gawkers away while I consider the candidates — their stringy hair and fattened bodies roll and smash together, clothing like seaweed, they are a coven of toothless wretches, they shout and laugh at those who work across the street, the ambitious young, who they say will one day take their place.

One bell reminds us of our loneliness, the ramifications of the other shoe that must surely drop. I warm soup in an iron pot that hangs over my fire, they come to it with tin cups like a Dickens story, like we are acting in a renaissance play. Many of us forget the audition, we don't know quite how we landed the part.

Homelessness is not a condition nor a profession but an art.

Four Bells

My student dressed for the weather after all, four bells it's warm, more September than November, everybody loosens, the high school kids drape their jackets over their shoulders, our trolls strip their weeds. I spy my student, he is younger than he seemed this morning, his face fresh and bright. I look up from the lined page and catch his eye. I wonder how he sees me, my beard blackly pointing toward the ships, my own *I am so far away from home* in its furls. Is it possible he sees me as the playwright I would have been, my poetic stanzas all lined up? Sometimes I want the words to be less perfect, less proper, my education betrays my heart, I want to say things as they are and leave the superfluous, I want to say *fuck off* and I end up saying *fuck thee off*.

I hunch to my work, the wind into my

straining mouth.

Four bells is when the door to sanity starts to close, the other door is also closed, we are in a variation of purgatory, not unlike the warm space between the doors to the barroom, the one behind us closed against the wintry outdoors, the other closed, we wait.

The skies are porous, perilous — *when will the darkness?*

Eight Bells

At eight bells, Harry's madness torques, Saint Rose spreads curses, Marcus feels for his pulse with his missing hand, our trolls haggle, the skeleton of Gloria's umbrella creeps away, Matik madly paddles. This is the underside of fairy tales — the forest ragged and barely distinguishable from the sky, sirens on the other side, trains roar.

There is enough light to continue writing on the lined paper, my student will return tomorrow morning at seven bells and I will hand my pages over to him, my careful words designed to add weight to his bones and allow no monsters beneath.

Seven Bells

Mornings feel as if my tent is plunged into light, its sensitive skin glows from the

bottom up, there are no rips but plenty of scars. Soon the bells will soften into snow and during those harsh and beautiful months their peals do not reach us.

Do they toll for thee?

Spring will once more come like a blessing and my tent will again dip into light and warmth. Our trolls will frolic, Saint Rose will scurry through the city and return rich, Matik will cry out for her canoe, we count, feral Harry may have fallen into the final space in the paupers' grave, we remember our faraway homes, our mothers in the next room, our fathers in the fields, the floating sheep, the ships will continue, the shivering city, the trains through our shoulders.

I pack my pages into the bag like an inheritance, an avalanche of truth, a few secrets for my student who didn't ask for advice.

I angle the bag through the fence, he thanks me. I know he is grateful, and he walks away with the bag, he carries it carefully as if it contains something living. He turns and looks at me with electricity, he already has the sparkling notion that life is no less a miracle when seen from the inside of a pale and worn tent.



Nobody Mourns a Drifter

Fiction by DEB VAIL. *Honourable Mention for fiction in the 2026 Word on the Lake Writer's Contest.*

Guy drives off the ferry and down the road until he spots the Co-Op where he's arranged to meet a friend. He rolls his old truck into the parking lot just as a light rain stops and clouds separate to expose the noonday sun. Steam rises off the asphalt.

This is his first trek to an island off the coast of British Columbia, and he marvels at how lush the rainforest is. The tide is out, his windows are open, and a deep breath fills his lungs with the sulphury smell of decomposing seaweed mixed with a hint of pine needles. So different from the springtime rot of the prairies where he was born.

He's anxious to meet up with Amos, who has lined up enough reno jobs to keep two old drifters busy all summer. There are decks to build, windows to install, and a complete overhaul of an old house owned by a hermit who, according to Amos, has serious anxiety

about letting people inside his home. With his gentle smile and low self-esteem, Amos has a way of gaining people's trust.

Guy hopes his friend hasn't underbid the jobs, because he's tired of living hand-to-mouth.

The ferry is running behind schedule, and he expected Amos to be here waiting when he arrived. Guy sends him a text. *I'm at the Co-Op as planned, where are you?*

No response.

He waits a few minutes before sending another.

Still no response.

Once the traffic from the ferry passes, silence covers him like a weighted blanket. A subtle anxiety sets in. Guy doesn't have Amos's address, so he checks his phone to make sure he's got the right date. Yes, he's exactly where he's supposed to be.

To ease his worries, he reaches for his

sketchpad and pencil tucked in the glove compartment of his truck and begins drawing the line of trees behind the Co-Op building. Water colours and acrylic paints that Guy hasn't used in years rest in a small case tucked under the passenger seat. He's debated if he should chuck his art supplies, but if he does, he fears he'll be tossing the best part of himself. And then what?

As he draws the outline of trees with a charcoal pencil, the branches influence his imagination, and suddenly he realizes he's sketching Amos with his sharp features and proud nose that he tends to point with.

An hour passes. Guy is hungry and fires off one more text before pushing his sketch aside and sliding out of his truck to head into the Co-Op.

Just as he reaches the glass door, it swings open as the last customer exits. He grabs hold before it shuts. The rush of air makes the cowbell tinkle. Every rural store he's ever entered has a cowbell, and the sound always triggers a sadness he can't explain.

With no employee in sight, he grabs a loaf of bread and heads to the refrigerator for a pack of processed cheese slices and deli ham.

At the cash, still no employee in sight. He's about to ding for service when a woman's voice echoes from behind the door marked TOILET. She sings Abba's *Dancing Queen* with great passion but is so off key she sounds more like an injured dog. He stifles a laugh, leaves his purchase on the counter, and scurries down an aisle where he lets out a chuckle.

When the door finally opens, a full-bodied woman with a mop of long red ringlets tinged white at her temples steps out. She's far from seventeen and no dancing queen.

On seeing him, she freezes. "I thought the store was empty. I didn't hear the bell."

"I came in as someone was leaving."

"Just my luck." She's wearing black genie pants and a denim shirt with a white apron cinched at the waist, and her green eyes sparkle.

Guy has a thing for gingers.

Determined not to laugh, he approaches the counter and pulls out his wallet. But a giggle tickles its way up from his diaphragm. He can't stop it — tries to apologize, but that makes it worse. He bends at the waist, rest his hands on his thighs, and laughs so hard he snorts.

Poker faced, she rearranges the jars of pickled eggs by the cash register and waits until he settles.

He regains composure and straightens up. "There's nothing like a good pickled egg."

"I pickle them myself."

Guy tips his cap up to take a better look at her.

"They go well with a cold beer," she says.

Now Guy thinks he may have met the perfect woman.

"Your husband is a lucky man."

"I don't have one, but I'm always looking." She throws her head back and lets out a good guffaw revealing a mouth full of white, straight teeth. Not a filling in her head. And at her age. He's got a mouth full of mercury and missing molars, so he never throws his head back.

She finishes ringing in his items. He passes her a twenty and opens his hand to receive his change. The tips of her fingers land heavily on his palm as she lets go of his coins, sending a shiver down his spine.

Did she notice?

To keep the conversation going, he asks, "Have you ever tried pickled tongue?"

"Of course. I raise my own beef."

The dimple on her left cheek that he initially took as a deep wrinkle is so bloody attractive, but there's not much else to say.

"Thanks," he says, and scoops up his bag.

"Are you on the island for the big wedding at North Point tomorrow? I'll be there."

"No, a friend of mine is building someone a new deck. He asked me to come help." He thumbs toward the parking lot. "I was supposed to meet him here an hour ago, but he's late."

Like a raw egg hitting a hard floor, her face changes — the dimple sinks into a deep wrinkle, green eyes turn threateningly red-rimmed, and that strong hand that sent a shiver down his spine slams the countertop. "Amos? You know Amos?"

"He's a friend." Guy does not overuse the word 'friend.'

"Oh, yeah? He started my deck and said it would be faster if he went to the mainland with his truck instead of waiting for supplies to be delivered. I gave him a thousand dollars cash and haven't heard from him in three days."

Guy swallows hard. "Wait, Amos is an honest man."

"The police on the mainland are looking for him."

"I'm sure he'll finish your deck."

Her eyes bulge. The high colour starts at her cleavage, travels up her neck to her cheeks and her forehead, until her face is as red as her hair. "Says you! I think you should leave." She flicks her hand as if he's a stray dog about to get underfoot.

"Calm yourself, I didn't steal your money."

"But your friend did."

"I don't believe that."

"He's gone, my money is gone, how else can you explain it?"

Pushing the door open with a shoulder, Guy backs out of the store.

He's lost track of how many times he's been shooed away from places, and it triggers a deep rejection.

As Guy marches back to his truck, his throat swells. His eyes begin to water as he looks back at the Co-Op and sees her in the window with her phone to her ear.

At times like this, his lonesomeness rips at him like a vicious dog.

Guy starts his truck, hits the gas, and sprays gravel at the building as he turns onto the road heading back to the ferry terminal.

He parks on the soft shoulder at the side of the road to wait for the terminal gate to open, then calls Amos one more time. He listens to it ring and ring.

How could Amos think this was a welcoming place?

In his rearview mirror, he spots the woman from the Co-Op walking toward him carrying a jar of pickled eggs. Her weight shifts from one foot to the other, and her long red ringlets swing behind her.

Guy breaks into a sweat. He hates confrontations. He's never won one, especially with a redheaded woman, but anger fires in the pit of his stomach.

He tightens the elastic around his grey ponytail, gets out of his truck, and stands with his feet shoulder-width apart.

She stops three feet in front of him. "I brought you pickled eggs."

"Keep your eggs."

"I'm trying to apologize." She shoves the jar at him until he accepts.

"I don't need an apology from you."

"You're right, but the thing is..." She covers her face with her large hands and starts to cry. "The thing is... the police found your friend, and my money."

Guy's stomach turns. "I'm sure he has a reason for what he did." His mind races — he knows Amos used to have a drug problem, but he's been clean for twenty years. Nevertheless, he offers a silent prayer. *Please, please, don't be using again.*

“He sure does.”

Guy leans against his truck waiting for more, but she keeps on blubbering.

A reluctant witness to so much emotion, he moves toward the cab of his truck, opens the door, and tosses the pickled eggs on the passenger seat.

She follows at his heels. “I don’t know how to say this.”

Exasperated, he turns to face her. “Say what?”

She wrings her hands, shuffles her feet, and blurts, “The police found Amos in a lumberyard parking lot. Looks like he died of a heart attack. They found my money in his pocket. He’s not a thief.”

“What?”

Barely a whisper, she says, “Amos is dead.”

Guy rubs his chest. As staggered as he is by this news, he’s also filled with gratitude that Amos didn’t disappoint him. Guy is all out of resilience.

The ferry rounds the point, heading toward the island’s terminal.

Guy sinks to the ground, resting on the heels of his scuffed steel-toed boots.

She steps closer to him. “You’re in shock.”

“I guess I am.” Guy’s body rocks back and forth — a coping strategy when he feels abandoned. Amos had sat with him once after a fistfight at a logging camp. Guy wasn’t even involved in the altercation, but it triggered memories of his stepfather, and before he could prevent it, a full-blown anxiety attack had set in. Amos had helped him into his room where the other men couldn’t witness, and they sat together until

Guy stopped rocking. Now Guy wonders if he ever repaid that kindness.

She stands beside him, a hand placed on his back.

“What’s your name?” he says.

“Sage.”

He leans against his truck to get to his feet. “I’ll have to notify a few people.” But that’s not true — Guy knows that no one mourns a drifter.

The ferry sounds its horn as it nears the dock.

“I have to go.”

“I know where Amos was renting, and someone will need to clean the place out.”

Like Guy, Amos had few possessions, but he loved to whittle even if he wasn’t particularly good at it. And a stranger might use all his efforts as fire kindling. That’s a sadness Guy can prevent. “I can do that.”

Her dimple reappears, and her eyes are as wide as a child’s while waiting for a friend. It strikes him that she might be as lonely as he is.

“Amos vouched for you before he left. He said you were a good friend.”

“He said that?”

“If your name is Guy, then yes he did.”

He smiles.

She flops her hands on his shoulders. “Stick around.”

The warmth of a compliment, the weight of her touch, and the sound of words he’s been aching to hear make it impossible to stop the flow of tears that settle in the deep wrinkles of his weathered cheeks.





The 2026 Festival in Review

Article by M. D. JACKSON

The 2026 Word on the Lake Writer's Festival happened May 15 – 17 and by all accounts it was one of the best festivals that the Shuswap Association of Writers has ever organized. From the keynote speech given by local author Gail Anderson Dargatz to the Sunday wrap-up at the Okanagan College, the festival was full of workshops designed to inform and encourage the aspiring writer as well as the invested reader.

This year the weekend kicked off with something different. Shawn Bird organized a poetry even that began earlier in the afternoon on the Friday of the Festival. A couple of dozen participants attended the event, and all but 2 shared their poems. "We had performances by 5 poets," Shawn told me. "...then did a prompt poetry workshop, and nearly everyone shared what they'd come up with."

Then, at seven, the main event was Michael Slade's Shock Theater. This is an event that

Michael Slade has been presenting at festivals for the last eighteen years. He regularly recruits his fellow presenters to perform the scripts that he has written for this event.

Based on old radio plays, the stories are usually presented in a tongue-in-cheek manner to carefully timed music and sound effects. Unfortunately a technical glitch scuttled the timing of the music and the effects.

Nevertheless, the cast of the event which included Andrew Buckley, Finnian Burnett, Grant Lawrence, Jill Barber, Charles Demars and the rest of the presenters in supporting roles, decided that the show must go on. Sound effects were improvised and much ad-libbing helped carry the story forward. The play eventually concluded after much laughter and applause.

Saturday began with speeches and a Keynote address by Anderson-Dargatz, in which she outlined the sage advice that her older self wished she could give to her younger self just starting out as a writer. Then the



Deanna Kawatski, Iona Whishaw and Grant Lawrence on a panel discussion. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*



Deanna Kawatski at her workshop. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*

work began. That is... the workshops.

They ran all day until the banquet in the evening followed by the entertainment.

Grant Lawrence read from his upcoming book *Orcas*, Michael Slade cleared the hall of all the sensitive listeners and Gail Anderson-Dargatz played a very funny video. Then Jill Barber sang a set of songs that included a duet with her daughter.

Sunday everything moved to the college where another round of panels and workshops were held. Fun and intense, the workshops ended at 2 o'clock.

I heard from several people the opinion that this year's festival was the best that they'd ever attended. Everyone seemed to have fun and everyone walked away having learned something new.



Salmon Arm's Eclectic Store

with a unique selection of international & local giftware

- Giftware.
- Crystals & Stones
- Jewellery
- Incense & Smudge
- Singing Bowls
- Books, Tarot & Oracle Cards
- Homeware, Accents & Decor
- Musical Instruments
- Bolga Baskets
- And So Much More!!



110 Lakeshore Dr. NE, Salmon Arm, B.C. Ph: 250-832-2343

THIS SPACE AVAILABLE

FOR THE PRICE OF A
MEMBERSHIP TO SAW AND A
DONATION TO SUPPORT THIS
MAGAZINE (\$60)

Your message can appear
in this space

wordfromthelake@gmail.com



Gail Anderson Dargatz at her workshop. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*



Kyla Redekop receives her certificate for winning second prize for poetry in the Word on the Lake Writers' Contest from Mary-Louise McCausland. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*

Michael Slade's SHOCK THEATER 2026



Grant Lawrence, Gail Anderson Dargatz, Deanna Kawatski, Iona Whishaw, Andrew Buckley, Finnian Burnett and Michael Slade perform on Friday Night's SHOCK THEATER. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*



Grant Lawrence, Gail Anderson Dargatz, Deanna Kawatski, Iona Whishaw, Andrew Buckley, Finnian Burnett, Charlesw Demers, Jill Barber and Michael Slade in SHOCK THEATER. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*



Charles Demers and Jill Barber ham it up in Michael Slade's SHOCK THEATER. Photo by: *M. D. Jackson*

THE SHUSWAP ASSOCIATION OF WRITERS PRESENTS

THE TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL

WORD

ON THE



LAKE



SHUSWAP
association of
WRITERS

A FESTIVAL FOR READERS & WRITERS

May 21st, 22nd, & 23rd, 2027

SALMON ARM, British Columbia

**ALL NEW VENUE* ALL NEW
PRESENTERS! SAME GREAT FESTIVAL!**

**to be
determined*

SESSIONS INCLUDE:

- skill development workshops • open forums with presenters
- questions and answers • a relaxed and intimate setting

Expect to be encouraged, informed and thoroughly entertained.



#wordonthelake



Find out what our presenters, published authors and industry professionals can do for you. For information visit:
wordonthelakewritersfestival.com