

CONCOURS D'ÉCRITURES SHERBROOKOISES 2019
VOLET ADULTE

TEXTE FINALISTE

Wavers and Shields

par Éric Côté

Long shadows foretold the sunset behind the Sanian Mountains. Another disappointing day—thirty miles, and my destination still eluded me. When will I find her? Will I ever?

I remember that morning, four weeks ago. The sun shone through the window like a warm blanket of light as I sipped my coffee. Outside, Sasha was playing. His contagious laugh made me smile. The smell of eggs and potatoes drifted my way, announcing the breakfast Myriam was cooking. Mia strolled into the kitchen, still groggy, kissed my forehead, and hugged me. We've always been close. From the moment she grabbed my finger with her tiny hand, 16 years ago, she became the focus of my existence.

And now, she was gone, kidnapped by those foul Red guards.

Holding desperation at bay became harder. My body sways; my mind strays. For physical or emotional support, I was relying on my walking staff increasingly. With age, my strength had been dwindling. Gone were the days when I lifted weights heavier than myself. My speed had also been declining. Regardless, what I lost in power, I gained in stamina. Twenty years ago, I blocked or sidestepped any attack. Nowadays, I'm wise enough to avoid a fight. When it comes to it, though,

experience and training make it easier to dodge the blows. Sometimes, I swear I can foresee the actions of my opponent.

Leaving the dirt road behind, I turned right on an old path, clogged by overgrown bushes and tangled briars. After ten minutes of bushwalking, I emerged at the foot of a steep climb. I noticed dry, caked tracks leading up the hill. Dark, menacing clouds had been chasing me all day, and they were catching up. As I climbed the cliff, my skin prickled, and the hair rose on my neck. My heartbeat quickened. When I reached the plateau overlooking the valley, three men were standing there, looking ready for a face-off. Fight or flight? The decision wasn't mine anymore.

“Is it him?” said the one in the middle, sneering. About my height and size, standing feet apart, chest thrust out, he waited for the man on his right to answer. The imposing, muscular youth nodded. Standing a foot taller than the others, he had copper-brown skin, typical of the people from the east—the Shihanu.

“What are we waiting for?” the third troublemaker said. Tall and slender, with a screeching voice, he remained close to the leader. Sweat was running down his face as he bounced from foot to foot, glancing around.

“I have no quarrel with any of you,” I replied, calm, at ease, my breathing slow, and my senses attuned. “Leave while you're alive.”

“We’re three against one!” shouted the leader through pinched lips, his face reddening.

Unsheathing a rusty blade, the leader came at me in a flash, the scrawny one dogging his steps. He slashed from skull to toe, but he put too much strength in his strike and lost balance when I sidestepped. I lunged forward and thrust my staff straight at the windpipe of the slender man. Without stopping my motion, I turned to face the remaining two. The crunching sound followed by a muted gurgle told me the odds were improving. He suffocated swiftly.

“I’ll kill you for this,” said the leader, wide eyes and nostrils flaring. “Do something, young oaf!” he yelled at the Shihanu who was ambling to flank me. I couldn’t sense his presence.

With a scream, the leader lunged forward with an overhead swing. Dodging to my right almost got me killed. At the very last minute, I glimpsed a wooden club coming sideways from behind. It clipped my shoulder and sent me on a spin. Instead of fighting it, I embraced the rotation, and my swirling staff caught the Shihanu on the temple. He flew face first in the dust and lay there without moving.

The leader turned frantic, attacking left and right with a series of cuts and thrusts. Although he had energy and vigour, he lacked the skills. To lure him, I slowed down, feigning fatigue thus giving him an opening. He took the bait and lunged. Striking hard, my staff connected with the back of his neck. He died before touching the ground.

With the last ray of the setting sun, I stood there, drained and tight in the chest.

“When will this craziness stop?”

* * *

The Shihanu was breathing. I dragged him to the lean-to, bound his hands and feet and tied him to a post. Then I rolled the two corpses off the steepest part of the cliff, clear of the path leading up here. I didn't want anybody to find them and investigate the surroundings.

Careful to stay beyond his reach, I set up on the opposite side of the lean-to. I didn't bother gagging him. With the gale howling, nobody could hear him. Was he even able to talk? He had not muttered a sound throughout the fight.

I slept fitfully, rumbling thunder waking me all night. As I opened my eyes, dawn was stealing in. The storm had spent its fury overnight, and the sky brightened into the indigo hues of daybreak. Chilled and damp from the morning dew, I coveted the sunrise to come. The young fellow sat against the post, awake.

“You're far from home, young man. Unusual for your kind.”

He kept quiet, sizing me up, scanning me from head to toe.

“My name is Shandeep. My life is yours. It's the way of my people.”

I had not decided if I would kill him or not, and here he was, pledging loyalty, without knowing me—not aware of what I could do. Who are you kidding, Tom? He must be a year or two older than Jonathan. You would never find the courage to slay him.

“My name is Thomas Evergreen, but call me Tom. Thrust is not given but earned. What assurance do I have that you will not slit my throat if I set you free?”

“I’m honour bound!” he replied, a puzzled stare on his face. I had read about the Shihanu with their code, but never had I crossed their path before. They seldom wander west of the Great Desert. Why had this one?

“Can you speculate on the reasons I’m here?”

For a time, he watched me in silence.

“The waver,” he said.

I was at a loss. What was a waver?

“No, I’m searching for my daughter, kidnapped by a small detachment of the Red Guard.”

He pondered for a moment.

“That makes sense, I detect it in you.”

“Shandeep, you are incoherent.”

“But you’re a waver,” he said, as confused as I was. He brightened, saying, “I’m a shield.”

I'd never heard of wavers or shields. The capital's Old Library, a gold mine of knowledge, might possess information on the subject, but it was out of reach. Only a fool would travel to the city, let alone enter the library. Roads were hazardous; travellers faced dire peril.

"Shandeep, I don't understand a word you're saying."

He kept quiet for a while, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"Different powers exist in our world. Wavers use brain waves to sense others, to guess what they'll do. Strong wavers suggest ideas or talk without words." His eyes, as dark as a flock of crows, bored into my soul. Despite his young age, he exuded something unique, hard to place.

"Shields block wavers," he continued. "You can't feel me because I'm much stronger than you." He said it matter-of-factly, with no pretense, stating a simple truth. Shandeep was as candid as a child. Did he understand the notion of lying? "Strong Shields hide people around them. Some do it from away."

"That explains why I didn't see you coming from behind."

He nodded.

We sat there, quiet, eating breakfast. Weighing the pros and the cons, still conflicted, I reached a decision and cut his bonds.

"Gather your things," I said. "We travel light; we travel fast."

* * *

Three days later, as we were getting near the pass in the mountain range, the weather deteriorated. A snowstorm had been raging since dawn. By midmorning, gusting winds and flurries hindered our progress. Dark clouds hovered over the mountains as the gloom of twilight deepened. The wind increased, and the temperature dropped.

We left the trail behind and headed north on the slope protected by the wind. It was getting more laborious and hazardous to move forward. Suddenly, a low rumble resounded above us, and the ground shook under our feet. As I peeked uphill, I witnessed the impending doom—an avalanche was crashing down. I lost my footing and started falling, dragging Shandeep with me. We were gaining speed, tumbling.

Then, everything became as black as the pit of the abyss.

* * *

Regaining consciousness, I opened my eyes and saw Shandeep near me, a concerned look on his face. Cold, hard rocks lay under me, and an acrid, musty stench filled the air. I discerned the warmth and dim light of a fire. As I tried to sit, excruciating pain seared through my brain. I hunched over and threw up.

“Where are we?” I said through parched lips.

“A cave. You hit your head hard. Big storm outside. Been like that all day.”

“All day?” I shouted, making the mistake of moving once again. The throbbing pain was awful, and it took me a moment to recover. “You mean I’ve been unconscious a whole day?”

Fidgeting with the fire, he avoided my eyes.

“Two days,” he said.

Two? *Mia!* We closed the gap between the Red Guard and us, and I lost two days lying senseless. My new friend sensed my despair.

“Snow is blocking the pass through the Sanian mountains,” Shandeep said. “They can’t move either. Rest! You’re in no shape to walk or fight.”

It was a long, restless night—tossing and turning, moaning in pain, dreaming of Mia. I woke up to a rumbling stomach. My head was still throbbing.

“Here, have some soup,” said Shandeep.

A scent of rosemary and thyme emanated from the hot, wooden bowl. I burnt my tongue on the first sip. The taste of tomatoes and chili peppers warmed my soul.

“They can’t leave,” he continued. “Carts and wagons won’t move in the snow. You must learn about your power.”

* * *

A week passed. I made progress with Shandeep's exercises. Instead of solely relying on instinct, I began to understand my ability. I perceived things with my intellect as if I was seeing them. Then, he tried teaching me to compartmentalize—finding where the concussion damaged my brain and circumventing the problem. I “saw” the inside of my skull and found the injured part, but I failed to block the pain.

It felt strange being trained by a boy young enough to be my son. Master Sheng would be proud of his pupil for explaining the basic concepts of wavers.

“How did you come to study under Master Sheng?”

“He took me in when my parents died.”

Silence fell. None of us found comfort and solace that night.

* * *

Eight days after the avalanche, an epiphany occurred. I succeeded. I blocked the pain. I built a wall around the wounded part of my brain.

“Be careful,” Shandeep said. “Pain protects you. It tells you if you push too hard. Walls are easier to tear down than to build up.”

Looking at him cooking dinner, he reminded me of my oldest child. He stood taller than Jonathan, but both shared broad, muscular shoulders.

“I had a son that would be close to your age.”

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me.

“Jonathan died three years ago. He envisioned the world in black and white, with no shades of grey. Although sweet and gentle, my son resented injustice. One day, he stumbled upon Red guards, roughing up a young woman. He tried to talk them down, but they ignored him.”

Shandeep was now facing me, leaning in, peering into my eyes.

“He grabbed one and pulled him off the girl,” I continued. “Although just 14, he was stalwart. The guard fell on his rear and lost his helmet... and his dignity. All passersby started laughing. They arrested him on charges of assault. I was out of town teaching. When I came back—” My chin trembled, but I refrained from crying. “When I came back, two days later, he was dead. They said he slipped and broke his neck. I never believed it.”

Shandeep looked at me. He didn't speak, but I saw tears welled up in his eyes. Talking wasn't necessary between us anymore.

Strange how you can live near people all your life and barely know them. In barely more than a week, Shandeep and I grew closer than most men. Maybe it was the circumstances, but I suspected it had something to do with his age, so close to Jonathan's. I liked the kid.

That's why I needed to leave.

* * *

Before dawn, I rose silently, packed my things and left. Shandeep had helped me considerably over the last days, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything happened to him. I hiked towards the camp, and the cool, damp air irritated my lungs. Snow crunched underfoot as an owl hooted in a nearby tree. Based on the frost on my staff that nipped at my fingers, winter still held its grasp on the land.

I reached the top of the mountain at the break of day. As I scanned the horizon, my heart stopped, and I sank to my knees. The camp was empty. Too late! Bent forward, my head in my hands, I cried—then cried more. My brain was hurting once more, and I threw up. I felt hollow inside. Unable to concentrate, I lost track of time.

“They won't kill her,” Shandeep said, from behind. “They recruit power wielders, even by force. Master Sheng would want me to stop that. Friends stick together, Tom.”

I had not heard him coming. I took a deep breath and centred myself, rebuilding the walls around the injured part of my brain. Mia was my focus now.

“Shandeep, I need your help,” I finally said.

* * *

We ran hard and fast on the main road. Caution was a luxury we couldn't afford. By evenfall, we stumbled upon their camp. Two guards patrolled the camp, while two more stood guard at the entrance of a vast tent. Six horses were picketed beside it. Other soldiers sat by campfires. The odour of roasted meat mingled with sweat disgusted me.

At midnight, we snuck into the camp, hugging the escarpment until we reached the back of the massive tent. Using my new knowledge, I probed our surroundings. Nobody stood near us. With the utmost caution, I cut the canvas, and we crept inside. Walls divided the tent into sections, and curtains blocked our view, but a faint light was visible on our right.

Peeking inside, I saw Mia on a bed. Four bald men sat on each side of her, mumbling incantations. Shandeep pulled on my sleeve and pointed at the buckler. Shields! Four shields enclosed my daughter, preventing her from pulling the wool over a soldier's eyes.

Careful not to rouse them from their trance, I snuck behind one. Shandeep exuded intensity. Furrowed eyebrows, tightened fists, and lips pressed together, he gazed at the monk on the other side of my daughter. That man tumbled as I killed my target. I jumped to my right and plunged my knife under the chin of a third monk, driving it upward through his brain.

Fury in her eyes, Mia was sitting on the bed, glaring at the last monk. I stared, speechless, as she rose, took a sword, and sank it into the man's heart.

“Mia!” I said.

She spun around and gasped.

“Daddy?” She closed her eyes and opened them again, reaching out with a trembling hand. A small smile turned to laughter and tears, and she leaped into my arms.

My heart was pounding like a mad bull. “Mia, I’m so sorry. I should have been there.”

“You are here now. It’s all that matters.”

Shandeep cleared his throat. Mia whirled around, but I steadied her arm.

“He’s a friend,” I said. “We need to go. We’re not out of trouble yet.”

* * *

The first light of dawn brought the thundering of hooves. Six horsemen were approaching. We had reached the hills, but threat loomed in sight.

“Shandeep, take Mia to the cave and hide there tonight. If I’m not there by morning, leave. I shall hold them as long as I can.”

Mia whirled around, grimacing, shaking her head. She tried to talk but only stuttered. I hugged and kissed her.

“I love you, Dad,” Mia said, ignoring the tears sliding down her cheeks.

As they started up the hill, I moved to higher ground and nocked an arrow on the stolen longbow. A rider got hit through the neck and fell. A second arrow struck a horse, and it plunged, sending the horseman flying headfirst. Bucklers raised, the other four closed in.

My next projectile pierced a man’s thigh as he reached the bottom of the slope. He screamed in pain. The other guards jumped off their horses and ran at me, swords and boards in hand. Grabbing my staff, I whirled it towards the first one, but caught his shield. They tried flanking me, and we started to dance on the hillside. Never concede the higher ground in battle. So, I moved as they moved, defended as they attacked. We were sizing each other up.

A guard thrust his sword at my gut but received a crushing blow on the wrist instead. Judging by the noise, it broke the bones. His scream drowned out the clunking of the fallen weapon, and he turned to flee. That was his last mistake.

The other two rushed me, hitting from every direction. My staff spun in circles, a blur of motion against the flurry of swords. My power helped me stay one step ahead of any move they tried. I could not detect the other soldier—the one with an arrow in the leg.

I fainted high and went low, sweeping the leg of my left opponent. He lost his footing. I aimed for his throat, but he blocked at the last second. A sharp twinge in my shin made me stumble and fall—an arrow protruded from my calf. By instinct, I tucked and rolled away from the men, maintaining a safe distance. I glimpsed the archer before the swordsmen attacked me again. He was the one I wounded earlier.

I moved to keep the two guards between the archer and me. My calf was killing me. Fighting, even walking, was getting harder. For a time, I kept them at bay, then another arrow sent me flying on my back. Pain seared through my chest and breathing became difficult.

The guards cheered their friend while approaching to finish the kill. I knew my end drew nigh. Then I heard a gurgle and saw an arrow sticking out of the guard's neck. Out of nowhere, Shandeeep appeared. Two kukris in hands, he crashed into the second man, hacking furiously. But I marvelled at Mia, bow in hand, transforming the archer into a pincushion.

I was losing my hold on reality. Instantly, Mia was at my side, looking grim.

“We’ll get you out of here, Dad,” she said with a trembling voice.

“No lies between us, sweetie.”

“Tell Myriam and Sasha... I love them.” The headache returned. My walls were crumbling.

“That’s not fair. I need you, Daddy. What will I do without you?”

“Exceptional... things! You will... always be... my greatest gift,” breathing was a desperate, deadly duel against my failing body. “Flee... far...”

And darkness fell.

* * *

Two weeks later, we reached my small, tranquil village. Once lovely, it appeared bland, even dreadful, without my dad. On the doorstep, I hesitated, unnerved. Mom was there, washing the dishes. She turned, dropped a plate, and ran to me, half-laughing, half crying. As she pulled back, she noticed the dreadful expression on my face.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She looked at the staff in my hand, gazed behind me at the stranger, and her smile disappeared. Clutching her arms to her chest, she stumbled as she scanned the horizon.

“Where is my Tom?”

“He didn’t make it, Mom.”

Staring into the distance, she looked 15 years older. Then, she peered at my new friend, sizing him up.

“My name is Shandeep,” he said. “Tom was my friend.”

He bowed and offered his hand. My mother took it in both her hands. Feet dragging on the ground, she led us to the kitchen table and started preparing food.

Little by little, she straightened up and lifted her chin. I saw her blink and wipe her tears. Steadfast, she approached the table.

“You will tell me everything about your adventure, young Shandeeep,” she said. “And you too my love. Eat for now, then sleep. We can’t stay here. They will come back. Tomorrow, we ride early, we ride fast.”

– *The End* –