

The 2017 Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition
Judge's Report – Elizabeth Tan

Thank you to the Fellowship of Australian Writers WA for inviting me to judge the 2017 Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition. As someone who loves reading stories but hates choosing favourites, I both enjoyed this experience and really did not enjoy it. I despaired over my eventual longlist of twelve stories – whittled down from a collection of seventy-two entries in total – and read and reread them at cafes, in bed, on my sister's couch, with a cat on my lap, *sans* cat-on-lap, until my pile of stories became the shortlist of seven that was announced in August. This is an anonymous short story competition – it shouldn't be this painful, I thought. But it was genuinely difficult to say goodbye to stories and particular characters – their small, earnest lives, into which I was permitted an intimate window – and it is a testament to the writers who sent in their stories that the task of judging was such a challenge. I hope that I'll spot some of these stories in a literary journal or anthology in the future.

There's a passage from Helen Garner's essay 'I' that gives me tremendous courage as a writer. In it, Garner describes

the experience that most writers would recognise – that of having to learn to write again for each new book. Between books one passes – or *I* do, at least – through a phase of having *no accumulated competence*, of being once again a complete beginner [...].¹

Now, not all of us are as prolific as Garner to be able to talk so casually of writing *books*, plural, as in 'more than one book'. But I can connect with the experience of learning how to write again with each new story, that each new story demands its own process. I derive great satisfaction from reading a short story in which the writer has stepped up to this task of learning to write the story that they have written – that is, to write the story the way that it *needed* to be written. And each of the short stories that I'll talk about in this report is satisfying in this very way.

One recurring theme that I noticed across many stories entered in this competition was unlikely friendships, and in particular the makeshift families that are built by lonely people.

This is what drew me to ‘The Caretaker’ by Jemma Tyley-Miller (VIC), a story about an old ex-con who travels the country, repairing and squatting in broken, abandoned houses, and who takes a motherless boy into his care. When the boy begins to refer to the old man as ‘Grandad’, the old man reflects: ‘*Would it hurt him to let him think so for now?*’ Even though this is a tenuous and temporary family, it nonetheless offers a warm shelter to two loners in the time that they need it – a respite from hurt. There is also an unlikely companionship at the centre of ‘Pig’ by Philip Silvester (WA) – that between the titular pig and our protagonist-narrator, Harry, who’s nursing a hard-won nugget of gold in a self-made hut. Harry and Pig have two things in common: torn-off ears from past scuffles, and a love of whisky. Like ‘The Caretaker’, this story is about a fleeting but nourishing connection. Both stories are propelled by gruff, wounded narrators: maybe they are hiding from a past shame or regret that they are reluctant to disclose in full to the reader, but they are deserving of healing nonetheless – would it hurt them to let them have those brief moments of warmth and safety in these stories? ‘The Caretaker’ and ‘Pig’ are my Commended picks for the competition.

What I like most about the two Highly Commended stories, ‘The good earth’ by Rosanne Dingli (WA) and ‘The A30 Woodsmen’ by Kit Peek (NSW), is the way they make use of very specific technical knowledge – gardening in the case of ‘The good earth’ and timber-getting in the case of ‘The A30 Woodsmen’. In ‘The good earth’, a woman meticulously plans to murder her husband, bury him in the garden, and then plant a lemon tree on top. There is lovingly crafted detail in this story, such as in this passage describing the roots of the lemon tree: ‘They were amazing roots, citrus roots with their fine networks of veins, thick white trunks, and pale tunnelling fingers. They fit the diameter of the hole like a dream.’ This kind of crisp, satisfying imagery – the kind that fits in the diameter of the reader’s mind like a dream – is also present in ‘The A30 Woodsmen’, where a crosscut saw ‘flexed like a muscly python’ and where the protagonist and his brother, who are tagging along with their grandfather on his wood-getting quest, observe with dismay the ‘huge, messy parcel of door-stop sandwiches unquestionably stuffed with cold corned beef and mustard pickles, all twelve them’ that will be their lunch. ‘The good earth’ and ‘The A30 Woodsmen’ are tangible, grainy, fragrant stories, and utterly delightful to read.

I have awarded third place to ‘Godsend’ by Jodie Kewley (VIC). This is a quiet story, heartbreaking in its familiarity and ordinariness. Rhonda is returning to her family home the night before her second wedding, and the house is rustling with memories. This is one of

those stories where you can't point to any dazzling stylistic techniques or flourishes; it is instead a story built on specificity. There's this common trap that I often see in creative writing students at university – in the writer's reflections they are required to submit alongside their works of short fiction, they might say things like: I didn't give my character a name or go into detail about their background because I wanted them to be relatable to anyone, or, I kept the exact nature of the conflict between my characters vague so that the reader could substitute their own experience into the story. Avid readers know that emotional investment in fiction doesn't work that way. Earlier I described 'Godsend' as familiar, but it's not because I've been through a divorce like Rhonda, or that my father suffered from a fading memory, or that my sister died from suicide. As readers we are entrusted with these very particular, vulnerable details; we are trusted to empathise with another's life different from our own. Jodie Kewley patiently sketches Rhonda's family and the family home – the chest of drawers in Rhonda's old room, for instance, which is 'filled even after all this time, with the clothes Rhonda used to wear, her old curling tongs and bottles of nail polish (surely gone hard by now), her swap card albums and bracelet beads'. The gutpunch of the story's ending hurts because these are characters – like worn chests of drawers heavy with disappointments, losses, failures – who have such modest dreams for the future, and seem to have finally arrived at a place where they're basically stable and okay but could really use a win ... and they're denied that happiness. And there is something terrifyingly real and sad and familiar about this trajectory that has stayed with me long after reading.

The second-place story, 'Dead Ringer' by Julie Woodland (WA), had the most distinctive narrative voice of all the shortlisted stories. It's the type of voice that makes the reader work hard, as you're dropped in a little behind the action – 'Merle reckons it all started when I finally got around to getting the Kombi' the story begins – but it cultivates a terrific kind of intimacy; the reader is regarded as a confidante. The middle-aged narrator of 'Dead Ringer' heads to Turquoise Bay *sans* husband for a holiday with her long-time friends, gets into trouble, gets bailed out by her girlfriends – all the way treating the reader to snarky commentary and some terrific wordplay. This is a succinct, knife-like story, with not a lot of dialogue, but the characters nonetheless feel incredibly lived-in and convincing as a group of friends with a textured history – I like the way that you can sort of intuit who's closer to whom, or which characters are besties. It's a cracking good read – thank you to Julie Woodland for writing it.

And finally, first place goes to ‘Doors Closing’ by Dorothea Pfaff (WA). The protagonist, Julia, is waiting anxiously to hear from Tom, a man she’s been dating briefly. She’s starting to overanalyse his silence, to reframe and re-angle their last date. Slowly, we discover why Tom hasn’t called, and the story then turns to consider the question: how do you mourn when there is no socially approved script for your grief? The world around Julia seems determined to make a non-event of her loss: as Julia wanders in a daze through a bookstore, rides the train home, walks through the bushland near her apartment, she seems to be searching for a sign from the universe, and the story seems to stretch out with her, searching and searching – but it’s just the same benign scenery, the same old world. ‘Metal clad cameras bolted to posts at various angles [glare] at her. Not really seeing her at all.’ Much like the third-place ‘Godsend’, this is a quietly devastating story. Even though this story is about Julia being unseen in her grief, I felt ‘seen’ by this story. Thank you to Dorothea Pfaff for writing it, and congratulations.

ⁱ Garner, H. (2002). I. *Meanjin*, 61(1), 40–43.