

2022 Stuart and Hadow Short Story Competition: Judge's Report

I'm immensely grateful to the Fellowship of Australian Authors WA for the opportunity to judge this year's Stuart and Hadow Short Story Competition. Initiated in 1977 to honour the work of brother and sister writers Donald Stuart and Lyndall Hadow, this prize has featured some exceptional writing from its place getters over the years since, with the anthology *Storyfire* featuring thirty-two winning short stories from the years between 2005 and 2018. It's a great honour to contribute to a continuing and evolving history based here at FAWWA.

The 2022 Stuart and Hadow Competition saw 83 stories submitted for consideration. While less in quantity than in other years, the list was distinguished by an impressive quality of writing overall. Thus, I read many, many convincing and engaging stories that sometimes comforted, sometimes challenged, and frequently extended my understanding of the world and human behaviour. Through this wealth of stories, I travelled to various parts of Australia – metropolitan, regional, remote – as well as other countries. I found myself in convincingly drawn suburban settings and vividly realised dystopic futures, with writers massaging words into narratives of war and peace, horror and revenge, fantasy and romance. Realism predominated, but stream of consciousness, surrealism and satire also featured, and form ranged from standard prose with dialogue through to script-like work and more lyrical pieces verging on prose poetry. Most prominent in the stories that, creamlike, rose to the surface were so-called domestic dramas, seemingly 'small' narratives that spoke to the role of memory in identity and the conduct of ethical relationships, as well as the human condition and our place in a rapidly changing world.

In assessing the stories, I applied the following criteria:

- Use of precise and original language
- Use of suggestion to develop meaning
- Effective evocation of mood and atmosphere
- Demonstration of acute observation and consistent detail
- Use of strong writing technique, including sentence construction and correctness in grammar and punctuation
- Above all, voice was critical, with standout stories demonstrating a distinctive and compelling voice that drew me back for repeat readings.

Given the high quality of submissions, developing a shortlist of six stories involved, rather than selection, a slow whittling down process from the original 83, to 59, then 23, then a longlist of 9. The three stories that did not make the six-story shortlist from this point deserve special mention; they demanded multiple readings and provoked an appreciative response on each occasion. These are, in no particular order: 'Precious Things', by Joy Kilian-ESSERT, from WA; 'One of those towns', by Kit Scriven, from Victoria; and 'Tommy Asks a Favour', by Barry Divola, from WA.

And so we come to the announcement of the commended stories and the winning three stories. In alphabetical order by surname, the three commended short stories are:

'Curtain Call', by Megan Anderson, from WA

This story features a coming-of-age narrative, focused on the unusual friendship between Mez and Emma. Through a simple story that opens into something far more complex and ambiguous, the narrator's vexing grief is transmuted through the natural world into the mystical. Meaning is not asserted but brought to the work through the artful use of suggestion. Setting is evoked vividly through the eyes of youth, with the experience of beachside summer brought to life through precise language and an empathetic immersion in time and place.

The second commended story, 'Gold', by Rebecca Higgie, from WA

In this poignant story, which never collapses into sentimentality, grieving father Henry must eke out the previously expressed breastmilk of his partner for their son, Ollie. With the arrival of his own father, Henry has the gentle support to work through grief while still caring for Ollie over time. The story is structured around the bottles of breastmilk, cleverly using the time the milk was expressed to frame Henry's memories. Though unnamed, Ollie's mum's presence pervades the narrative, through the metaphoric power of her milk and the sheer physical labour it took to express it.

The third commended story is 'Amateur mycology', by Emily Tsokos Purtill, from WA

In this story of a family and its losses, the narrator's visit to his brother's place 'down south' provides an opportunity for the young men to come together in a different way, prompting new and unanticipated family breakthroughs. The narrative is skilfully constructed, with foreshadowing utilised well. 'Mushroom' and 'concrete' link different forms of relationships, probing gently at the tensions within them, and the extended metaphor gracefully draws together whimsy and realism, potentially usurping the narrator's previous understandings of endings.

And now to the three placegetters and their stories.

Third place is awarded to Patrick Boxall, from Victoria, for their story 'Highway to heal'

In this densely realised incident-based story, a couple in crisis negotiate how to deal with their car's night-time impact with an animal. Drawing out comparisons between different forms of pain, the narrator must decide how to position themselves and whether to continue to draw on habitual modes of being. Humour is nicely integrated with pathos in a voice that is both distinctive and compelling. The claustrophobic Tasmanian wilderness setting is beautifully suited to internal examination, with questions around injury, pain, commitment, certainty and understanding of otherness building to a delicate turn and a convincing conclusion.

I've awarded second place to Jodie Kewley, from Victoria, for their story, 'My boys'

In this well-balanced realist narrative, Ivan is picked up from hospital by his older brother Vincent after a stay involving details that only gradually emerge. Centred on family trauma, the story deals with guilt, the influence of memories and the reparative power of articulating the past, along with its associated thoughts and feelings. Characterisation is credible, with the relationship between the two brothers convincing and affecting, and Ivan's inner world is brought to light with detailed yet restrained emotion and empathy. The possibility of change is suggested with a beautifully light touch.

First prize goes to Patrick Boxall for 'The Museum of Broken Relationships'

Messy and unlucky-in-love Jenna is observed by her slightly less messy friend, a writer, who narrates the movement of incidents: an invitation to The Museum of Broken Relationships by the curator of an installation featuring Jenna's ex, Phil, now known as Felipe; the provocation for Jenna to act out her heartbreak in a performance; and the outcome. 'Why can't my life be a work of art?' asks Jenna. A clever satire on relationships and the potential pretentiousness of art, I found this story funnier with each read, yet it also raises important questions around the performativity of relationships, the idea that art is built on suffering, and the relationship between art and truth. A very modern tale, the narrative features pitch-perfect dialogue and a slide into surrealism that is handled with aplomb.

Congratulations to all the writers whose stories I've named and, indeed, to all the entrants to the 2022 Stuart and Hadow Short Story Competition: your creative work resulted in some fabulous narratives. Special congratulations to Patrick Boxall, who, I discovered when given author details once I'd determined placings, won this same competition in 2020, and whose first- and third-placed stories this year speak to the capacity to write convincingly – and winningly! – across a range of voices and forms. Congratulations Patrick and well done all.

Josephine Taylor

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