

**Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre
2016 Short Story Award**

Judge's Report: Dr Susan Midalia

I've often heard it said that aesthetic judgments are largely a matter of taste, in subject matter, form and style. But I want to insist there are also objective criteria for the assessment of creative writing; I've applied four of them in my judgments of the 91 entries in this wonderful competition. The first and most important criterion is the writer's use of language. It must not only be free of clichés, awkward metaphors and overwriting; it must also be precise, incisive, resonant and rhythmically satisfying. Secondly, writing must respect the reader's intelligence. Memorable fiction doesn't explain, lecture or patronise; instead, it gives readers the challenge and the pleasure of creating possible meanings for themselves. Thirdly, I've looked for an engaging sense of voice, because *who* does the telling is as much a part of a story's power as the events it describes. Finally, I've considered how the structure – both the sequencing of a story, and its use of gaps and silences – can be used to entice the reader into a story's imagined world. In sum, I've looked for the way in which a voice can invite or compel us to be attentive a story's carefully chosen words.

I want to begin with the Young Writers Encouragement Award for a writer under the age of 14. The winner is thirteen-year-old Celine Ng, from Western Australia, for her story 'The Journey.' It charts the literal and metaphoric journey of a Chinese family from their village to an unknown life in Shanghai by juxtaposing external action and a young girl's imaginings about her future. In the process, it moves the girl, and the reader, from a sense of displacement and helplessness to a growing sense of inner strength and the beginnings of hope. Congratulations to Celine for having written this stylistically poised and emotionally mature story.

The next category of awards is the Youth Section, for writers between the ages of 10 and 20. I've awarded a Commendation to the story called 'Witch' by Rebecca Wang from New South Wales. This very amusing, clever re-writing of *Hansel and Gretel* constructs the witch as a manipulative, self-justifying narrator who blames the children's parents for neglecting them, and who represents herself as benevolent and badly misunderstood. I really enjoyed the story's sense of voice and deft use of wit.

I've awarded a Highly Commended to the story 'Another, Softer Time' by Joshua Green from WA. This beautifully written story about the journey to manhood in a so-called 'primitive' culture encourages us to re-think our ideas of the primitive. It's a sensorially rich narrative using vivid imagery and the musicality of language to express the values and practices of an unfamiliar and fascinating culture.

Second Place goes to a story called 'Jelly Sweat,' by Coco Huang, from New South Wales. This is an inventive satire of the ruthlessness of capitalist ideology and a version of masculinity based on competitiveness and the will to power. Using the satiric techniques of exaggeration, caricature and deliberate repetition to convey its ideas, the story reminds us that the best comedy not only amuses but also encourages us to think. Indeed, 'Jelly Sweat' reminds us that comedy is the most serious of all the literary forms.

I've awarded first place to 'Broken and Whole,' by Wendy Chen, from New South Wales. This is a thought-provoking and poignant story about the aftermath of a typhoon in the Philippines. It tackles a "big" subject by focusing on the humanly specific: a mother, a daughter, and the child they offer to help. Seen through the eyes of a lost and isolated child, this ethically ambitious and emotionally restrained narrative reveals the human capacity for generosity in the midst of devastation and despair.

And now to the Open Section. I've awarded two Commended places. One is to Julie Twohig from Victoria, for her story 'No Place for a Kid.' This 'creepy' tale about an immoral mother and a vulnerable child is a fine example of the domestic gothic. It slowly, disturbingly, reveals the darkness beneath the surface of ordinary suburban life. Its rendering of the child's innocence and sickening adult self-interest is both psychologically convincing and deeply confronting.

The other Commended goes to a very different kind of story: 'The End,' by Neil Jeyasingam from New South Wales. 'The End' is a dystopian narrative about the horrific effects of climate change; a warning about our refusal to act on one of the most pressing issues of our time. The beauty of this story is its use of laconic Aussie vernacular; at once amusing and chilling, it acts to reinforce the dangers of our current complacency.

I've awarded a Highly Commended to Melanie Napthine from Victoria, for her story 'Hungry.' By focusing on the intrusion into a woman's home by a young and seemingly harmless couple, the story becomes increasingly unnerving and morally problematic. It's an ambivalent crime thriller, showing the ease with which an ordinary and sheltered middle-class life can unravel, but which also raises questions about human need and our responsibility to others.

I've awarded second place to 'Time Passes' by Kathy Prokhovnic from New South Wales. This is a subtly written story about the return of the repressed. It counterpoints descriptions of the beauty of the landscape and a sense of human connection with shocking glimpses of a woman's traumatic past. It's a carefully wrought narrative about "the unsaid": seen from the woman's perspective, it reveals the hidden suffering that persists into the present, and which can make us strangers to even our most intimate friends. And like all memorable stories, it rewards attentive re-reading to appreciate its suggestive use of detail.

Finally, it's a great pleasure to announce the winner of the Open Section: Melanie Naphine from Victoria, for her story 'Not jumping, falling.' Narrated by a single man living in a block of flats, the story offers competing and equally disturbing narratives. Is the man in question an incipient pedophile? Or has the little girl he watches over a period of time been inappropriately sexualized by her culture? Or is she the victim of parental indifference? Or is the story ultimately about a man's isolation and his failure to help, and by extension, a criticism of contemporary urban society as a whole? Every detail in this masterfully ambiguous story suggests unknowable and melancholy narratives. It's a reminder that a good short story, in Alice Munro's words, contains at least two other stories. Congratulations to Melanie Naphine for her meticulously observed, skillfully structured and deeply unsettling story.