



600 word short story competition Winners

2022



Julian Cowan Youth Award

Winner: The Masterpiece by Eva Cheong (WA.)

He tilted his head and look at her critically. Just a little more work to the right side of her body and she would be finished. He couldn't contain his excitement. She was his masterpiece. Despite her death, he had found a way to preserve her beauty. Her mouth. Her nose. Those captivating stone eyes. Her presence seemed even greater than it was before, it felt as though she was clinging to him, whispering to him. With a final adoring gaze, he let his carving tool fall to the ground with a clatter. He had waited so long for this moment and she had always been unhappy with her body, hadn't she? Always complaining about her face, how all the other girls were prettier than her, and how he was going to leave her sooner or later. He had done her a good deed. Despite her cries of agony when he gently pushed his knife into her throat, he knew that he had done the right thing. A bottle of translucent fluid was in his hand, and he dabbed some onto a sponge and wiped her body. Up and down. Around the curves. Making sure he didn't miss a spot. The statue was glistening. He sat behind the desk to admire her. "Come to me, my dear" he whispered, and her eyes - stuck together with the mucus-like fluid - opened. They were blank, with no pupils or iris, and she gazed at him emptily. "Come," he whispered, "and see yourself."

The statue was no longer moist, the fluids having been absorbed into the stone. With a dull scrape, like a heavy block of stone being pushed along the floor, she slowly shifted her legs towards him. He smiled widely and cried out in excitement. "Quick! Come here!". He picked up a large oval-sized mirror from the ground and positioned it so that it was facing her. Her hand reached up to her face, gently touching it, stone on stone scraping against each other. It was cold to the touch, as were her hands. The mirror revealed a petite, feminine woman. Long hair and a slim waist. It was not her. In a rage, she flung herself towards the mirror. She mouthed inaudible words. He watched on in horror, not understanding why she was destroying herself with such violence. His masterpiece! To him, she was perfect. And yet, she was flawed. She was still not content.

“What did I do wrong?” he cried, but again and again she threw herself onto her reflection. “Stop it!”. Crack. Her nose had broken off. The nose that he had worked on for a week. Crack! Fragments of her hair tinkled onto the ground. Each strand he had perfected to the utmost of his ability, and now they lay broken, discarded, like shreds of paper on the floor. Her face now resembled a smashed-up watermelon, cratered and pulpy with deep crevices etched into her skin. Her arms were dinked with cracks and shards of stone broke off every time she hit the mirror. “No!” he screamed. He must do something to stop her! He grabbed onto her body tight, to make sure she could not move. Slowly, her head craned downwards so she was looking at her feet. In confusion he moved his face towards her neck to see what she was looking at. BANG! Her head collided into his with a quick flick of her neck. He shrieked in pain and fell onto the floor, groping at his forehead to stop the bleeding.

Her face was stained with blood.

Judges Comment:

This story makes an effective commentary on art and beauty ideals by way of clear imagery and fantastical elements. The physicality of the statue and her reaction to her changed, ‘ideal’ appearance has a strong impact on the reader.



Open Category

First Place: **Speak No Evil**

by Megan Anderson (WA)

Everything is pink: plush toys, glitter flamingos, cherry blossom hair clips. Yuki picks a Hello Kitty cap from the bubblegum shelves and makes doe eyes at the suit. Like she needs more kawaii tat.

He secures it over her glossy plaits. Against her school getup, its raspberry bow pops.

‘Hold the wrapping,’ he tells the shop girl. ‘She’ll wear it home.’

They step into Akihabara foot traffic like this is filial, but nobody’s fooled. In the uniform – black pleats grazing her knicker line – she can pass for a joshi kosei, but it’s four years since she graduated high school. And her father? Not this man. Her drowning father stepped in front of a moving train at Shin Koiwa last year, landing the family a crippling fine. This man is helping to pay it.

It’s a standard lark; 12,000 yen for a walk-and-talk along neon-slicked footpaths. A week’s groceries, five times a night. Law school will wait; the family’s better fed while Yuki’s relieving randy salarymen of their hard-earned. In this neighbourhood, especially. When she spots the easy money, she knows where to go.

She tugs one earring and gives the suit a coy smile, eyeing a side street. ‘I’m hungry.’ His inner provider looks lively.

They duck through the fabric doorway of a modest izakaya. A small TV spills cheerful game show sounds from above. Sake for him, soda for show, a serve of ika tempura to share. Perched at the bar, their forearms touch. Not strictly allowed.

‘How does this end?’ He’s probing the grey area between expectation and the law. She traps a nervous giggle in her fingers.

‘I’ve got homework.’ Yuki clasps her plaits behind her neck, and her white shirt pulls taut.

‘Two heads are better than one.’ He taps the stiff peak of her cap.

Yuki catches the young barkeep’s eye; scarcely a nod.

‘I could read your fortune,’ she tells the suit. ‘That’s extra.’

His smile is Cheshire. He knows that JK shorthand. Fortune telling, massage, more.

‘There’s a place out the back here,’ she says, nibbling squid. He drains his glass.

She leads him back through the noren entrance, down the alley to an unmarked door. Inside, she takes the fat volume of horoscopes from the hall stand.

‘50,000 yen.’

Notes spill from his wallet. She steers him to a cubicle, where a rolled robe adorns a massage table. ‘Get comfortable,’ she coos, tugging the curtain closed between them.

Her voice is impish as she flips the book’s pages. ‘Let me guess, Rooster? No, wait. Snake.’

Her most provocative giggle yet.

‘Dragon!’ he growls, tossing his suit to the floor. She corrals it from the gap beneath the curtain, hears the table creak under his weight. ‘And I’m ready.’

A plump silence.

‘I’m ready.’

Her exit is nimble. In the dark of the alleyway, the barkeep locks the door behind her. She hands him the bundle, and some cash.

‘That’s for Mum,’ she says. ‘The suit’s worth a bit. Give the pervert 20 minutes as usual. His shame will see him home. I left his wallet. And a Hello Kitty bathrobe.’

Her brother hoists his eyebrows. ‘Nice touch.’

On a train bound for Ikebukuro, Yuki rides the pink carriage – twenty sweet minutes with no male gaze. From the women, she fields pity and scorn. Skimpy uniform. Late hour. She shrugs; a couple more chumps tonight, and she can take tomorrow off. She pats the money at her hip and twirls her cap on one finger. Its cartoon kitten is a sage: eyes wide open, no mouth at all.

Judges Comment:

This story captures a distinct sense of place. The balance between the protagonist’s performance and what is going on beneath the surface is handled beautifully, and the author enters and leaves the piece with flashes of crisply rendered detail.



Open Category

Second Place: And the Rains Came Down by Sherry Mackay (Qld)

They said it would rain – the weather fellas, the BOM, the forecasters. La Nina, they said. The old girl brings the rain, they said. They said it was a low, a trough hanging off the coast. They call it a rain bomb, and a rain train. And it rains, and it rains, and it rains. All day and all night, for four days and nights. The brook becomes a raging torrent, forty metres wide. The waters sound like a massive waterfall, so loud you can hear it rushing down the creek bed, sweeping everything before it down to the Bay, and into the ocean.

A neighbour puts up a post on the local Community Page: ‘Missing Labrador, arthritic back legs; we think she was swept away in the waters of the creek. Please help us find her so we can say goodbye’. The husband jumps into his kayak, searching for her. The creek is a dangerous place to be, with fallen trees, and rocks and broken bridges. He doesn’t find her; they will never find her. She is twirling and dancing with the waves in the Bay, along with all the lost balls she will never catch again.

The creek banks are littered with flotsam and jetsam, even a shipping container full of soccer balls from the local club. Huge concrete slabs lie askew, cyclists turn back from the paths that were split apart by the force of the water. Where once you could walk through the forest and across the bridge to the local shops, now there is just – sand. Tonnes and tonnes of sand - an endless beach. ‘Where did it come from?’ people ask. ‘How can there be this much sand?’ You can see the path to the shops on the other side of the creek, no way to get there except to wade through the waters.

You can drive down past the village, and stop at the point where the waters partly conceal several cars. You know what they say: ‘If it’s flooded, forget it.’ But people drive into the unknown depths and some of them drown. They can’t get out of their car; they are swept away; they sit on the roof till the waters suck them down to the ocean.

The local fishermen come out in their tinnies, small metal dinghies that can rescue a couple of people and maybe their dogs. An old couple lie on their roof, waiting for the rescue helicopter, their dogs sitting beside them. The news footage shows them being

winched up, one by one, their animals left to sink or swim. Not so lucky are the old folk found in their houses, too old and sick (too lonely?) to escape. Some residents climb into their roof cavities, but there's nowhere to go at the last minute.

Imagine being those fellas – the ones who have to rip open the roofs, or kick in the front doors. Their sleep is littered with dreams of waterlogged bodies, the lonely people without family to save them, and the drowned dogs who stayed at their owners' sides. See the library, books ruined and tumbled in a heap outside on the mud-covered lawn. Weep over the furniture and paintings dragged out from the mud-encrusted gallery. Seventy years of history washed away in a day. Mums and dads and kids tangled together on a makeshift bed on the floor of the local hall. But the recovery begins; people come laden with brooms and shovels; they donate and bake and bring new clothes and shoes. Hope springs up; waters recede and they begin again.

Judges Comment:

The use of narrative voice in this work of flash is deeply engaging, with the sorrowful and resilient tone helping to bring to life the flooded communities in which the events take place. The writing style is both accessible and lyrical, drawing readers in.





Open Category

Third Place: **Wisteria** by Laila Miller (WA)

Marjorie always says yes when customers ask if she'll do windows too. While dust and grit from winter storms and summer pollen come and go, you can count on the four corners of a window being there. Scrubbing hardwood floors and walls papered with yellow flowers pays the bills, but windows show you your soul.

The breeze blows the honey scent of wisteria in from the garden. It reminds Marjorie of when she was a girl, working at the farm out east. Each spring, she wedged the storm windows off with a screwdriver, lowered them to the ground, and washed each side with a rag wrung from a bucket of vinegar water. The wooden frames had round holes to grasp them with. After the newspaper polish, she carried them to the basement, then returned to wash the remaining window, brushing off dead flies that had caught themselves between the panes.

Here, it isn't cold enough for storm windows. Windows are thin glass with cheap aluminium frames, even in expensive neighbourhoods. So we can hear birds from inside, Marjorie tells herself. Squeezing the rag from her bucket, she starts in the top left corner. If you don't keep track, you'll miss a spot, and they won't ask you back.

It's easier washing windows with a partner. Marjorie thinks of the old lady, Louise, who owned the farm. Her husband was losing his memory. Louise knew this, and at the same time didn't believe it. "He was intelligent," she said. "A councillor. The first to bring electricity to the farms." Louise consoled herself by keeping busy. Even though Marjorie was barely a teen, she could see that.

Sometimes Louise washed the insides while Marjorie climbed the ladder to do the outsides. Afterward they trimmed the wisteria, planted tulips, strawberries, potatoes. Marjorie didn't understand the point of it, two old people in the huge farmyard, one not knowing what time lunchtime was, the other too tiny and worried to eat.

Marjorie stretches to her full height as she works her cloth across the top of the window to the right-hand corner and back again. The window squeaks when she rubs

out fly specks. If you're tall, window washing is easier. She rests her cheek against the glass. She should keep moving, but lets her eyes follow the rainbows against the reflective surface.

She thinks about her boy, gone now. For a precious time, he helped her wash windows. At first, being small, he wielded the squeegee wildly and aimed the hose like a firefighter. It seemed in a single day he grew so tall he could reach without a ladder, singing songs, spidery arms swiping with strong strokes. Marjorie lifts her face off the glass and straightens. It's how she wants to remember him.

Marjorie descends, placing her feet together on each ladder rung before stepping further. She scrubs the bottom half of the window. It's good, cleaning in this country. Memories are easier somehow, and people need her.

The window is dry. Marjorie picks up the ammonia bottle and ascends the ladder for the final polish. At the second step from the top, she steadies herself. Her head feels a bit light. It would be nice to press her cheek against the glass again. She leans forward. Through the window, she sees the tulip vase on the mahogany side table she polished earlier, tulips from the shady spot in the east garden. She wonders why she hasn't leaned into the windowpane yet.

For a moment Marjorie thinks she feels the cool glass but no, there's nothing but the scent of wisteria.

Judges Comment:

The author of this story has created a protagonist through brief but illuminating sketches of detail. The use of sensory description, especially touch and smell, makes the scene feel vivid, and the character's feeling of vertigo at the end is palpable.



Novice Category

Winner: Drying Out by Kerri Major (NSW)

Five a.m. in bed, and I am filled with immense angst about the pointlessness of dried squid.

There you have a happy little squid in the sea, minding its own business. Snatched suddenly from its watery home and baked in the sun. Then thrown bodily into a soggy grave by soaking it in soup. Ma's peanut and lotus root soup, to be exact. Dried, then undried. All for what? Extra flavour, Ma says. Can't even taste the damn thing. And after all that palaver, Ma doesn't bother to call it squid soup. The poor squid has no place even in the name of its final destination.

I feel rage for this unknown, faceless squid - do squids even have faces? The squid who suffered for Ma, in her quest for all the little things to be just so, while she missed all the big things. Like taking responsibility for her own emotions. I can still hear her uncontrollable sobbing as she cries over her expensive vase, destroyed by her own hand to prove some point to Pa. She would rather grieve over the porcelain shards than face up to Pa's years of tepid indifference to her and the children. My sister and I, the two of us, grew up in the maelstrom of their passions, holding each other, crying when they cry.

I haven't felt this angry in a long time. Not since the time I flushed my whole stash of smack down the loo and chained myself to the bed so I wouldn't go lick the toilet seat again, filled with self-loathing, hoping for a stray grain or two.

Tired, too. Barely two weeks into this latest attempt to get clean and I feel weak and useless. My legs won't straighten, the knees have somehow unhooked themselves. My throat is bone dry, my tongue a desert.

The door opens and Ma comes in with another bowl of the damned soup. 'This will help,' she whispers, not wanting to speak too loudly or get close.

The incandescent fury rises from my belly to my throat. I lunge at her, screaming at the futility of her bland food, the pretence of her love that's forthcoming only now,

when she has years and years of neglect to account for. She jumps, and the bowl slips from her hands and clatters to the floor, its liquid contents splattering everywhere. Now she's done it. Now the poor squid has truly died in vain, its essence soaking into the ungrateful fibres of the carpet.

Quick, quick. I can still save it. Suck some soup out of the sodden mess on the carpet if I put my mouth to the floor. But I can't reach it. My right hand is still chained to the bedpost.

'Only been twelve hours,' Ma says sadly. Not two weeks, not even a day. She turns to leave, and I squint through the open doorway. I can see the kitchen, my father sitting stonily at the bench, turning the pages of a newspaper too quickly, an empty spam tin serving as an ashtray while another cigarette hangs from his cracked lips. My sister is crying softly next to him, shoulders round in defeat.

I reach out for her hand, and my chain rattles again. I can almost feel my sister's tears dripping down my parched throat, and the flames in my belly shrink. I lie back down and wonder how long it will take to dry me out this time before I undry myself again. Another two weeks, perhaps. I wait for Ma's next bowl of soup.

Judges Comment:

This is a melancholy exploration of familial dysfunction, repressed rage, and substance abuse. The narrator's tone is simultaneously wry and desperate, and the cyclical ending underscores the issues that arise in the story.



Highly Commended

Certificate: Berlin 2018

by Meghalee Bose (Vic)

When you go to Berlin, you expect many things.

Perhaps to weep. Or stand gazing upon museum exhibits and internment camps, with a stoic jaw – then to shake your head, brisk and weary all at once, and walk away thinking of the human capacity for cruelty.

You expect to walk along the Wall, eyes swallowing up graffiti and how Berlin refuses to colour within the lines. To chat philosophically with your friend on the train ride back, with an ache in your knees and a postcard stamped at Checkpoint Charlie.

It's just a crossing in the road now. You expect to be delighted at the irony.

You expect to cross Brandenburg Gate off a checklist, but you aren't overly fussed when it's crawling with tourists. It's not, after all, the kind of history you've come sniffing after. You expect beer, and square accents, and an educational vacation.

You do not expect to be stopped in the dead of the night, on a Eurostar bus from Paris to Berlin, snatched from sleep with a crick in your neck and blinking blearily. The officers climb on the bus and check everyone's passports, which is fine. But then they tell everyone to get off, and you have to wake your snoring friend. Barely catch your feet on the gravel outside, shiver in the sightless, nippy air. Stand in line while voices rise and fall in a language you don't understand.

And then they bring the dog and you jolt to searing, pin-sharp awareness. It has black fur and white teeth and you've always been petrified of dogs, but it hasn't mattered when you can tell kind owners to call their pets away. Not here, not like this. Instructions are issued and you can't understand them, but everyone starts unzipping their bags and the shade of the dog comes creeping, heavy breaths—

It brushes against the leg of your jeans, warm-blooded and present and you stare feverishly at the body of the bus. It holds your future, this dog. It had barked, jarring and vicious, at a man with a duffel – he has already been led away by officers to a building nearby, and the sound of the shutter closing was so loud – how terrified must he be?

The dog moves away, and you still can't bring yourself to blink.

Later in the light of morning, this memory will fade. In the excitement of a new Airbnb and getting skip-the-queue tickets to all the tourist traps – you will forget the sensations. The viscera. It will take you months, until you're safe and cozy at your student hovel in Melbourne again. Looking over your souvenirs, like the 10€ chip of plaster from the Wall, ziplocked in a plastic bag. It will come back to you then, how you sweated in that cold night. Made to stand outside a bus at 3 am in a foreign country, for forty-five minutes while an animal deliberated over your fate.





Highly Commended

Certificate: Rest in Peace Dad by Sarah Leighton (WA)

My Dad wanted peace. Even in sleep, nightmares crashed against the inside of his skull. His life was a series of black and white snapshots. He never told us the backstory, but it went something like this.

Gunshots, there was always gunshots.

The family gun, with its two different barrels, lies dusty in the shed since he's gone. Its story goes back a hundred years and maybe more. But this is not that story.

His Mother didn't die by gunshot. Maybe that would have been kinder.

At eight years of age he arrived home from school in one of north-east England's coal-mining villages, to silence, for the first time ever. No ricochet of his Mother's coughing around the coal-dusted walls inside the tiny terraced house. Just her lifeless body, tended by her own mother. The half-formed bundle of rags in the sink that would not be his second brother, or his eighth sister. A lot of blood.

The drunken grief of his father.

One more year and he had another 'mother'. Five more siblings after seven more years in the crowded house, where peace never was.

My Dad at fourteen years old finished school. Time to leave home, go south and find work. With a gun. Looking for peace. He never saw his father again because five years later the old man, drunk, shot first his mistress, and then himself. Dead. With a pistol. The story was buried deep in the family archives. The family shame too great to bear.

Much easier to ignore. In the green fields and mossy woods of country estates near the Welsh border, my Dad had a brief reprieve working as a gamekeeper. The odd-barrelled shotgun was used to shoot game and ducks for food, with Garry his beloved gun-dog and fine companion. For less than a decade in the end.

My Dad was ordered to fight for his country. A much bigger gun this time. Her

name was Bertha, an anti-aircraft gun. With his battalion, he walked her from Belgium to Holland. She worked hard in the Battle of Britain. So did the men. They were paid in cigarettes. That killed them in the end.

The 'war to end all wars' for the world shattered his fragile peace for life.

Guns went off in his head. Anytime. He watched planes flying overhead for the rest of his life. Could identify every one of them. We lived under a flightpath.

A short return to life as a gamekeeper, but his first wife died of cancer ten days before they boarded a ship, sailing out for "a better life".

He did eventually bring the family gun across the world. Used it to shoot rabbits, feed his new family.

But the noise in his head was loud, and sometimes spilled out. Then glass shattered and doors slammed, and he took the gun in his car. Sought the quiet of the bush for weeks on end. Open air and the beach. Fishing.

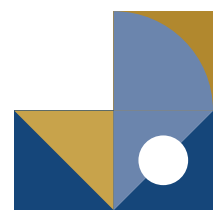
Cigarettes and the grief of a lifetime made his lungs bleed and his heart break.

In the end, he lay in a hospital bed. White walls and green curtains. No fresh air, no trees, no bush, no ocean to quiet the thoughts that hammered in the daytime, and the dreams that knocked at night. Just machines that beeped, and people who disturbed his fragile sleep.

He just wanted peace.

Two days before his seventy second birthday he said " I'm hanging up me gloves". No more fighting. "Three score years and ten", he said. He died the next day.

The shotgun is quiet in the shed.





Highly Commended

Certificate: The Pickup

by Linda Brandon (NSW)

'Hey kid, where's your old man?'

A bloke in jeans and a singlet leant against the door frame, a cigarette dangling from nicotine stained fingers. Sharp eyes in a face ravaged with acne scars grazed over me.

'Out.'

'Where's he gone?'

'Dunno.'

His arms looked thin but hard. Behind him a black car with mag wheels was parked at the kerb, too shiny to be from this neighbourhood.

He lifted the cigarette to pale lips and sucked in a lungful of smoke. 'What's your name, kid?'

'Emmy,' I said.

'So, Emmy.' He drew on the smoke, staring at me. 'How old are you? Fourteen? Fifteen?'

'Something like that.'

His tongue flicked across his bottom lip like a lizard's.

'How long do you reckon the old man will be?'

I shrugged.

He drew in a deep lungful of smoke. 'I'm here to pick something up. Do you know anything about that?'

'No. None of my business.'

He regarded me for a moment and said, 'Smart girl.'

I glanced up the street, but it was quiet. Even the kids were indoors. When I looked back, his gaze was on me, lingering.

'How about I wait inside,' he said.

After a beat I said, 'Not a good idea.'

His snake-like eyes narrowed to slits. He flung his cigarette onto the broken concrete of our front path. I watched it roll into a crack.

‘You know what I’m here for,’ he said and I could feel the air grow heavy.

He sniffed and spat on the concrete and his voice was flat and cold when he said, ‘I’m not leaving until I get it.’

He glanced behind him, maybe checking on his car, maybe checking that nobody was around.

He stared at me, his eyes as flat and cold as his voice. ‘I think I should come inside. We could have a drink.’

The afternoon had been hot, but it was cooling fast. The light was fading and shadows were stretching towards the street. I shivered.

‘I already said that wouldn’t be a good idea.’

Something flickered across his face. Anger maybe. I knew the flyscreen door was flimsy. I imagined the aluminium buckling under a kick or a punch. It wouldn’t matter that it was locked.

‘How about a beer? Your old man got any beer?’

I shook my head.

His tone changed and he leaned close to the flywire. ‘You’re not scared of me, are you darlin’?’

The fake sweetness made my skin crawl.

He reached for the flyscreen door. I held my breath.

A rock song punctuated the air and I jumped. He pulled a phone from his jeans pocket. Put it to his ear and said, ‘Yeah.’ He listened for a moment, swore and pocketed his phone.

He ran a hand across his chin and his tongue flicked over his lip again. ‘Something’s come up.’

In the street the shadows were merging as dusk took over.

‘I’ll be back,’ he said and leaned close to the flyscreen. ‘Soon.’

And then he was gone.

I walked to the lounge room and stood in the doorway.

Dad sat in the old chair facing me, still holding the gun.

‘I’ll have what he wants tomorrow,’ he said, ‘But you did well. And don’t worry, I

was ready.'

'I know,' I said. I looked at the gun and thought maybe it wouldn't have been a bad idea for the scumbag to come inside.

But that was okay. He said he was coming back – soon.





Commended

Certificate: **Between Them**

by Samantha Boswell (WA)

He wore checked fleecy shirts or striped T-shirts with woollen vests, Blundstone boots and footy socks. His hair, which was blunt cut, long, brushed straight back into a ponytail.

He stuck with the Pears spray-on conditioner they bought for the children. When he's finished showering, the bathroom is dense with steam and sweetly aromatic. His broken hairbrush ker-lacked through slick hair.

He says he never remembers anything.

Did you bully your brothers? she asks. He can't remember. Instead, he tells her about the accidental chopping of a cousin's finger with an axe. What about that time at Plaka's on James Street, when the SAS mob were giving you a hard time?

He doesn't remember.

When they first moved in together, she read through his document box, including a postcard collection from a Nina in Norway among discharge papers and immunisation records. She knew he had travelled to Bergen. I'll burn them, he said, when she told him of her find. Now he doesn't remember that either.

He wore glasses with flexible arms. After checking the lenses for paint smears and dust, he held them like hooks to jag onto both ears.

He believes materialism is a blight, and refused to settle for a regular job after finishing six years as an able seaman. He is proud at his mother's expressed concern for his welfare. He says she never got to see him pigeon-holed.

He puts Elmore James or Tom Waits on the turntable, and dances around the lounge room. The walls – once pock-marked from the cratering of billiard balls - are now filled, sanded smooth, and painted.

He is vegetarian, and asked her mum to cook a roast with Yorkshire puddings. He does the evening dishes to Led Zeppelin.

He picks splinters from both hands with a dressmaking pin while seated in the

armchair beneath the window where she fed their babies. He displays the depth of these wounds. Mined crevices.

When the children were still small, he played chasey, monsters, tiger, and falling down. His footsteps rattled window frames. There are photos of the girls indoors wearing his discarded, out-sized boots to slalom on polished floorboards.

For months, he sat outside their eldest's open bedroom door until she fell asleep. At her cries, he would say "Still here, sweetie".

He made their furniture from recycled timber. The workshop floor was paintlayered in pink, blue and green. The kitchen doors were crafted from spruce packing containers and left unvarnished. Baltic pine-lined walls were sanded and shellacked.

He leaves Muddy Waters tapes in the Mazda and complains about apple cores which collect in the plastic tray beneath the handbrake.

He reads woodwork magazines and Getting the Details Right. He buys cookbooks, how-to renovation manuals, Earth Garden, Zen Buddhism and Melville's Moby Dick. He enrolled at uni to study business but gave it up. At TAFE, he took night classes in woodwork, and art. He made jarrah jewellery boxes, music stands, desks, and garden benches.

Before parties, he'd crank the volume on their stereo, choose the James Brown CD and cockerel-stride with spins to turn. The kids used to join in. He put on Lagerfeld cologne she bought for a long-ago birthday. And brushed out his hair.

The music would be sending them all frenzied as a sugar hit. If strands of hair hung molten in his face, she saw the colour was that of fresh-laid tarmac. Maybe he'd glance up and smile in that way he has. Twisted. Carving through stubble. Eyebrows peaked.

And they'd look at each other. And it was as if nothing could come between them.





Commended

Certificate: My Mate Lucky by Martin Chambers (WA)

You probably will have seen it in your news feed. 'Plane crash on City Beach'. That was my mate Lucky.

Lucky had attitude. Like, good attitude, such as because his bus driver job was made redundant he reckons he's lucky 'cause it gave him time for flying lessons. Eventually he got the sort of licence to take his friends up and he'd take me for a spin sometimes. I don't really get off on flying, just going round and round looking down, but Lucky was always good for a laugh and spending time with him made you feel good.

Thing about Lucky is he is like Little John in Robin Hood who was a big fella. Lucky is about the least person you'd say had luck. Although if you think about it we assume luck means good luck but luck can be of two kinds and what type you have really depends on your point of view.

If you ask Lucky, he's the luckiest man alive. When Mandy left him he reckoned he was Lucky. 'Look at me now. Free man. Do what I want. See the kids when I want and they reckon I'm pretty cool. Luckiest man alive, I am.'

When they got married I was his best man. I think that was about the only time he ever looked at me, tears of happiness. Said nothing, but I knew what he was thinking.

When I first met him he was a window cleaner. Loved it.

'Best job in the world,' he said. 'I'm the messiah. I clean their dirty windows and they say to me "I see the light".'

Then he got a wharfie job through Mandy's dad who was the union boss and he kept it after she left and you can bet your last dollar he said that was lucky.

It was Mandy's dad who got the cancer and had the chemo and everyone was saying how bad it was but Lucky who was saying how lucky her dad was 'cause he got better. It's how you look at things, isn't it?

On the wharves the union had the port work stitched up and most times he and his mates played cards and chewed the fat. Sometimes they'd throw a line off the back of

the tugboat, draw lots for whoever kept any fish they caught. 'Best job ever. Normally you have to be born to it. I must be the luckiest man alive.' He lost his job on the wharves when to bust the unions the government flew in strike-breakers and he got redeployed to Transport. 'Lucky me! Plenty others just got unemployment.'

Anyway, we get to be flying along Scarborough, sharp white of beach and cool blue ocean, dots of people, and at first I think he's jossing me 'cause the engine splutters and calm as ever he's toggling switches and stuff and then says 'Oh well, looks like a beach landing.'

Except there are people on the beach so we landed in the ocean and then we look at each other and laugh, relief.

'Well done', I says to him, and I'm guessing you know what his reply was.

Then we swim to the shore and I'm a bit in front so I don't see the shark but people on the beach are yelling and pointing and I don't think anything other than they are pointing at a crashed plane until I am sitting on the beach.

That was the last I ever saw of Lucky.

'Not skill,' he had replied. 'Luck.' And pointing to himself, 'Luckiest man alive.'





Commended

Certificate: Translation to Fire

by Kristen Roberts (Vic)

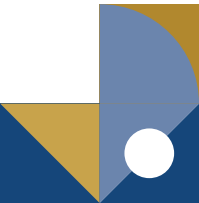
I'm out of the office today, down in the paddock working on a new translation: wood to fire. My text is a tree felled by last spring's storm, an ironbark that's dried as it's watched the seasons change from its new angle, branches hardening as they learned the grace of grass. It is time for it to become something new; no tree should be supine.

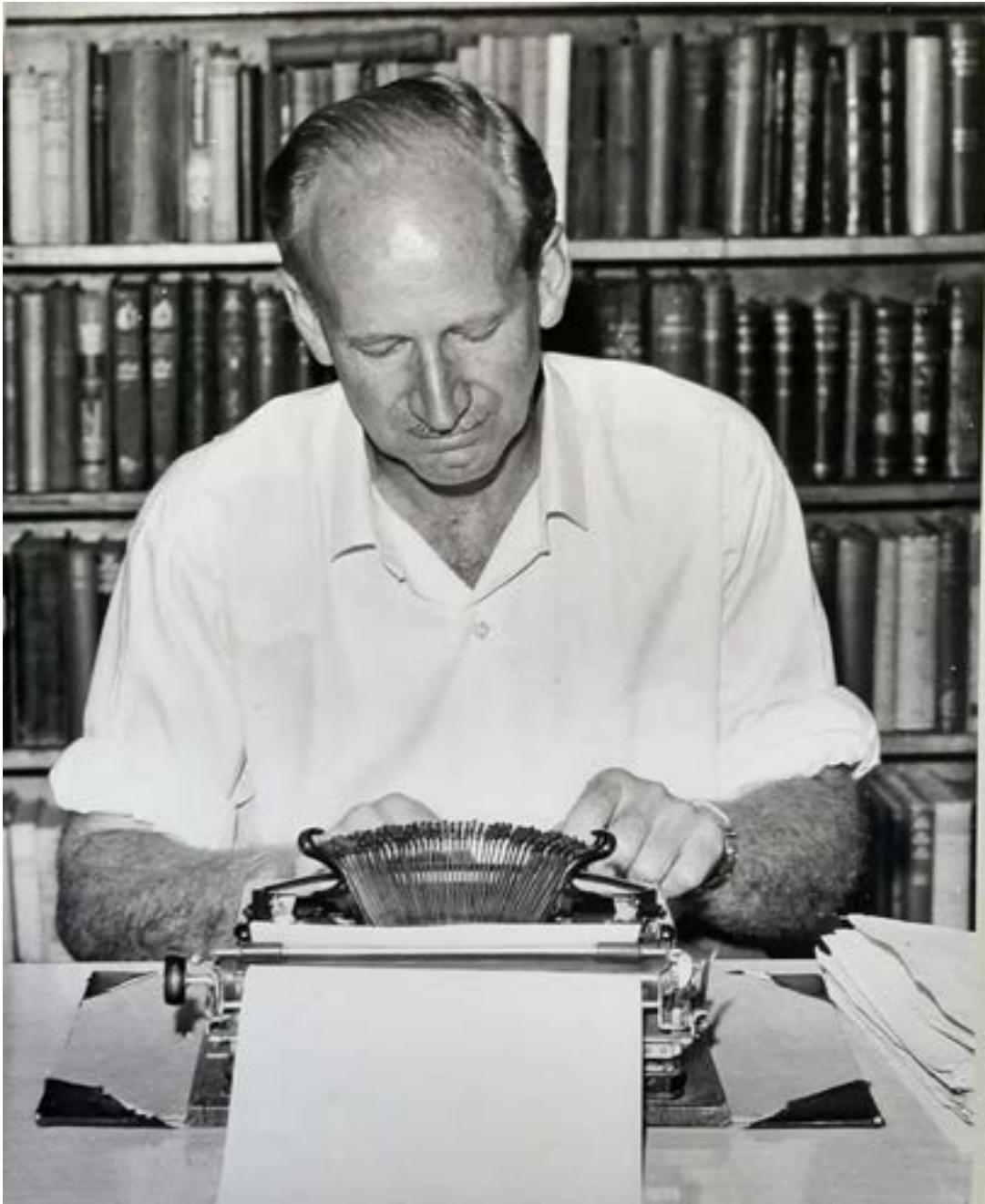
I begin with care, not yet articulate in this ancient language. I know that match means start and paper help, and that dry means ideal, but these are only liminal semantics. I transcribe my first phrases cautiously, applying a small tongue of heat to the original wording. Soon leaf becomes flame and twig ember.

I move on to larger passages where short knots of tense seem to work in my favour, and simple seams of narrative change easily beneath my hand. My confidence grows as I discover that, while kindling translates to combustion, limbs mean continuity. I smile at the sounds of this new language as it gains life, primal consonants clicking and popping in the chilled air. Each section of branch that I tackle only enhances the dialogue.

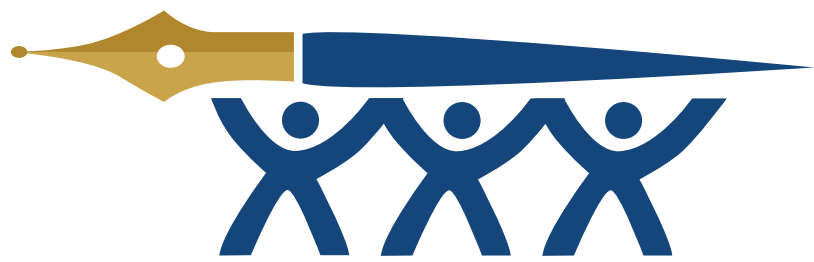
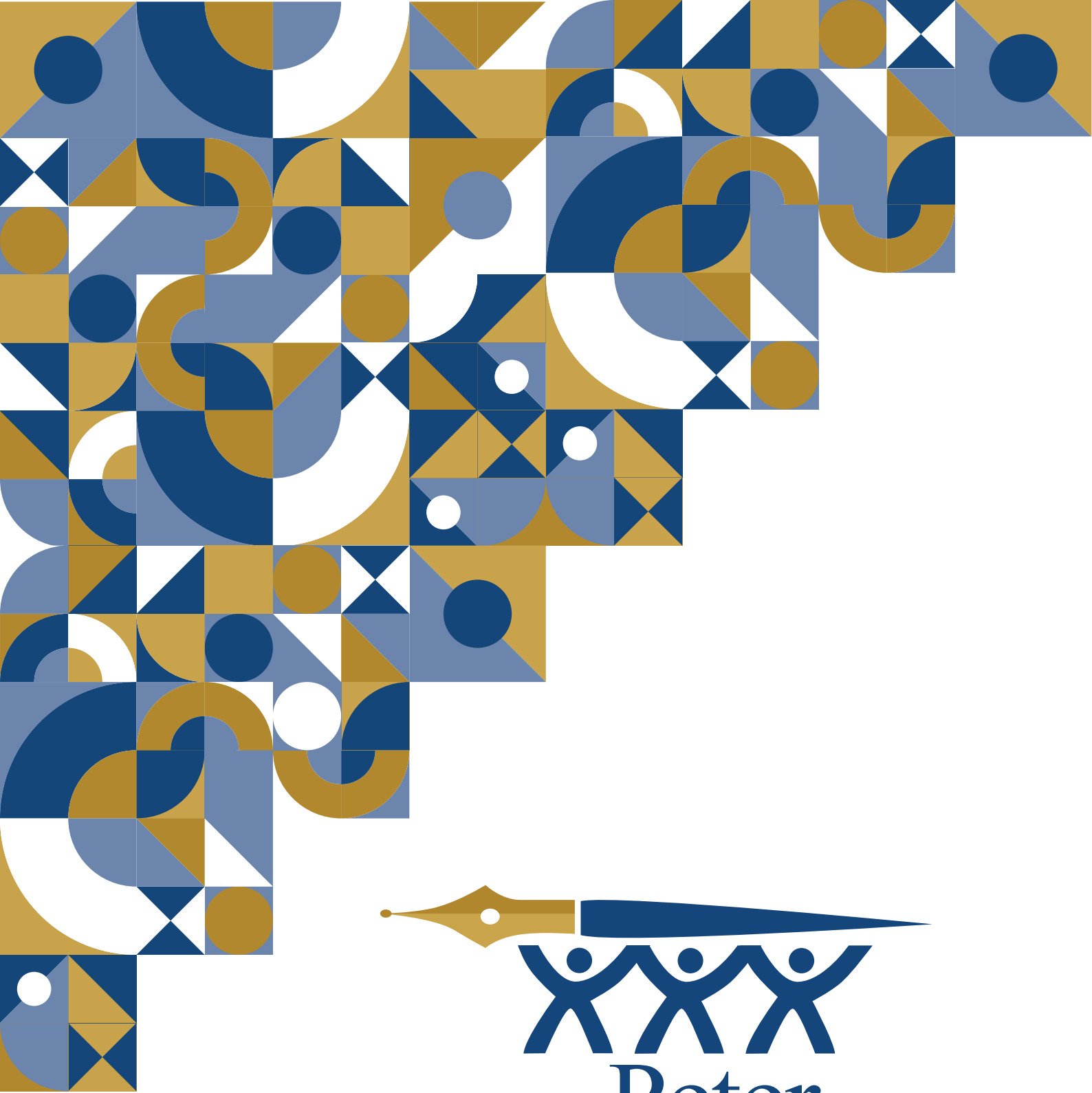
The suffusing warmth of success leads me to wrestle with weightier segments, examining ambiguities in the grain in an attempt to decode their flammability. But I'm too keen, adding them before I'm certain of their meaning, and I lose traction. I realise that the spaces between the words are necessary for flow, that a density of text means smother while space mean breathe. I return to leaf and twig, hoping their familiarity will lead me back to the rhythm of the narrative, but the fire becomes confusing, increasing in complexity to the point I can no longer interpret its direction. I remember my illiteracy, my naivety. My few trite phrases have raised the ire of the native speakers.

I have read that in Eskimo there's no word for yesterday, and I realise that, in fire, there is no word for mercy. I empty a bucket over it, and then another, because the one thing I am sure of is that, in fire, water means end.





In Memory of
Peter Cowan



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