We'll Stand In That Place and other stories

Edited by

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MARGARET RIVER
·PRESS·

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Introduction

As a reader and a writer of the short story, I am non-binary, perhaps with half the appreciation, or perhaps with twice. I bring a little first-hand knowledge of the craft required to make from the loose sentences, images and paragraphs something that is structurally more coherent than a flash fiction, a cameo or a prose poem. The short story is both seed and flowering tree; it is concise but with the capacity of a novella or a play to launch fully fleshed characters, conflicts and denouements. Each story-embryo matures within the contours of its own cast. In the short story form, a writer commits to a vivid and entire world; a world in which voice and dialogue matter exceedingly, sometimes tangentially, and every sentence is measured to carry structural and thematic weight. Chronological elements in fiction compress and distort time. While textual intimacy is also presupposed from the novelist, the particular kind of precision I'm talking about here is spared the longer form.

Hemingway described this knife-edge art of short-story writing and revising, in which editing plays so vital a part:

> If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff is that you, not your editors, omit.[1]

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1 Hemingway, Ernest. 'The Art of the Short Story' , *The Paris Review*, Issue 79, 1981.

As an editor, my selective filters amount to personal taste as well as to consideration for the writerly aspects. I have a tendency to ask myself, 'How did this writer set about planting, hybridising, growing, and pruning? Is there the right amount of sunlight, water and shade? Are there fringes of compost layered in the soil?' After all, stories may be innovative or political; they may engage with difference, but still may not quite work.

There were many appealing stories on the carefully winnowed longlist, for which I am indebted to the expertise of Luke Johnson, Donna Mazza, and Camha Pham. The forty-seven stories I read were richly varied in style, themes and cultural engagements. There was a strong sense that many were informed by contemporary anxieties about the environment, about cultural difference, about the need to specifically voice and make affirming space for queerness. Others were recuperative; they impressed me, by succeeding in realising complex emotions that we sometimes fail to honour in our daily lives, and in our close relationships. The restorative potential of language to recover possibilities, memories, transitions and images lost to us through the passing of time are, in the best of hands, rendered eloquently, if variously, by the form.

Narrowing down to winner and runner-up stories took several reads but ultimately I chose what had been striking from the outset. 'We'll Stand In That Place' is tactful and sculptural; a courageous narrative of addiction and queerness set in St Kilda. Kit Scriven forces the reader to confront difference by skewing the conventions of subject, object and place. The spatial relations between clothes, accessories and body parts, notably feet,

are intentionally disturbing and radically idiosyncratic from the opening paragraph: 'The pants of Andy's best suit tighten at Baby's knees and crotch. Baby settles onto his haunches, stretching Andy over him.' One needs to read attentively to learn that Andy has overdosed; that Baby's grief is ritualised. Scriven knows how to withhold and rearrange details; his craft producing something disturbing and unique. He marries the beautiful with the sordid. Abject associations are tessellated with shavings of dialogue to create a portmanteau of needles and magnolias; a cowboy's lariat and scalloped lines in the sand. Through gaps and repetitions the story builds intensity towards an ending that is technically challenging to accomplish: conceptual and transcendent. How beautiful that it celebrates community hope and pride amidst stigma and grief!

The runner-up story, 'Thylacine', by Catherine Noske, works very differently, but no less intensely. It enters the interior world of a nameless couple: a stay-at-home wife's early pregnancy contrasts her geologist husband's field-trips after he discovers a rare fossil. Composed of numbered sections, each a possible prose poem, the story riffs on the gaps between myth and history, language and meaning, extinction and erasure. The enigmatic fossil can never be fully imagined. *'Wefounda breathe thylacinefossil Perfectlypreserved. Furthernorththananyothereverbefore,'* the woman's husband gasps, over the phone. Noske uses the thylacine as metonymy. It becomes a narrative framework to evoke other absences and breaches: the 'collective dream-world' of the past, the violence of white settlement, the exploitation of mining and industry on Aboriginal land, the boundaries that separate husband and wife. The subtlety and

precision of her language shows great sensitivity to the issues of violent possession. Equally, her restrained tone construes domestic forbearance and colonial silences as paired forms of gendered and racial violence.

The winner of the South West prize, emerging writer Rachel McEleney, shows exceptional flair in her story, 'The Day The Rain Stopped Dancing'. This futuristic dystopia evokes great atmosphere and suspense. McEleney creates a world genetically modified by a US grain that is blended with contraceptive chemicals during an African drought. But GentaCorp's GM 21 cross-pollinates with other crops to mutate human cells. While the narrative begins with some familiarity, strangeness and discomfort are signalled early by the extinction of animals and climate changes. The scientific logic of malfunction is progressed with impressive control; the dialogue and focalisation figuratively enriches the story, so that the boundaries of non-fiction elements and fiction are seamless.

Genre works as an organising tool but also an umbrella for the short stories in this collection. Interestingly, the eighteenth-century Francophile derivative of the word *genre* means 'type' or 'style.' An earlier, twelfth-century French source, however, is the word *gendre*, meaning 'species', a prototype word for 'gender' in English. As a literary framework, genre is malleable, and in our times of technological and generational change it has become supple, diverse and generative. Though the short story is notoriously harder to package and market than the novel, the cutting edge of magazine and book publishing trends has endorsed a flourishing

of genre fluidity. Poetic language, speculative, historical or fantasy elements, and even literary criticism have been crossed with more conventional short story tropes to produce exciting books such as *Heat and Light* by Ellen Van Neerven, *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennet, and *Look Whose Morphing* by Tom Cho.

Readers and writers alike, it seems, have found pleasing variety in genre hybridity. But whether conventional or innovative, each writer in this collection successfully explores and renews the navigable territory that the short story has claimed in recent years.

Not surprisingly, my task of judging this year's Margaret River Short Story Prize has been a joy and a privilege, simply for the reading. I have been able to renew my reflections on the art of the short story, its currency in contemporary Australian writing and what this chiselled, exceptional and varied form can do. Now, I invite you to do the same.

— Michelle Cahill