

## **Judge's report – KSP short story competition.**

Short stories are a different, and arguably more difficult form than novels, for the simple reason that you have less time. In the space of a couple of thousand words (or fewer than 1000 words in flash fiction) you need to catch your reader's attention, set your scene, introduce characters and emotion and intrigue and plot – and then somehow gracefully bow out, having taken your characters and your reader somewhere new and unexpected.

This year the KSP writer's centre held its annual short story competition with two categories – adults and under 18s, with an open theme. From 105 entries, 72 were longlisted by the team at KSP and given to me to judge. From these, I chose the 14 stories on this shortlist.

The best short stories feel effortless and immediate and complete. Often, it's about what you leave off the page. Too much detail will weigh it down, while too little won't satisfy the reader. Then there's the ending – does the narrative trail off or is there a sense that something – even just the mood – has shifted? Some writers may get there in a draft or two, but the winning stories felt like the product of many hours of revision and thought.

With a short story competition, it's also wise to use every element at your disposal. A standout title grabs the reader's attention, as does playing with form – two of the stories I chose were not straight beginning-middle-end narratives but presented as a eulogy and a recipe. The challenge then is to make sure the form you've chosen is the right one for what you want to say, and in these two stories, it was.

I had a limit on the number of entries I could choose, and there were a few I set aside reluctantly. Others felt more like an extract from a longer work – well written but not complete in themselves. While submitting novel extracts is a great way to test your ideas, they have to work as stories in their own right. Finally, I already knew that judging was subjective, but now I really know it. If you weren't shortlisted this time, remember that another reader would have almost certainly chosen differently, so keep writing and keep submitting.

The best stories invite empathy – in a compressed space these writers showed me something of their unique experience that I was unfamiliar with yet somehow recognised. There was a willingness to be honest on the page, even if it was veiled in some way. You might call it voice, you might call it authenticity. I don't know what to call it, but I know it when I see it. With these winning and commended stories, I forgot I was judging and simply became lost in the experience of reading them. Thank you and congratulations to everyone who entered.

## **Under 14 Mundaring Winner**

### **The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing – Tegan Carton**

**This story of creative rivalry and revenge between our talented artist narrator and the new class member – who is a mirror, but not the kind that reflects, the kind that steals – is original, surprising and satisfying – everything you want in a short story.**

E.M.C is an ambitious and creative young aspiring author. An avid reader from a young age, she has been writing and telling stories since she could string sentences. Often wowing her parents with her deep thoughts and insights.

Awards:

**Highly Commended: The One I Left Behind – Eve Ballard**

**A disturbing tale about how the versions of ourselves that we seek to leave behind can turn up when we least expect them. A kind of revenge horror story, *The One I Left Behind* is also a polished and evocative piece of writing.**

Eve Ballard has a love of the written and spoken word and has been published in quarterly journals, newsletters and magazines. Eve has won the ‘Nilumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing’ in the youth category and is the overall winner for the Story Factory 10th Anniversary, ‘Voices in the Wind’ competition.

**Highly commended: The Ghost in my Mind – Holly Richardson**

***The Ghost in My Mind* immediately captured my attention with its disturbing, satisfyingly gothic imagery and unsettling conclusion. A portrait of suburban horror, it depicts how sometimes the most fearful things exist only in our imagination. It also left me with more questions than answered, which is perhaps the true mark of an excellent short story.**

Holly Richardson is a youth writer from Sydney who has an interest in gothic and fantasy literature. She is currently in high school and has a passion for writing whenever she can.

**Highly commended: Falling Unseen – Elizabeth Lima**

**Sometimes a story really is, like Lorrie Moore said, a photograph. This one centres on a familiar romantic image – falling leaves – yet the writer captures something new and enigmatic with it.**

Elizabeth Lima is a Year 10 student from Perth, Western Australia, with a passion for literary fiction and creative writing.

**Highly Commended: She Remembered Too – Katie Clarke**

**This story evoked such a strong and shifting sense of place, from a lost home to the immediacy of a hospital bedside. I loved the vivid detail in this story as well as its celebration of intergenerational connections.**

Katie Clarke is a high school student with a love for storytelling, art, and culture. She writes to capture emotion, memory, and the small details that make people human.

**Highly Commended: Checklist for my future best friend – Alya Dorhmi**

**This was a story where the title immediately sparked my interest. It does a lot in a few words, with its clever use of rhythm, repetition, punctuation and second person tense,**

**making us understand both why a new best friend is needed, and what has been lost. Congratulations Alya.**

Alya Dorhmi is a 12-year-old homeschooled writer from Melbourne Australia. She has loved writing and storytelling since she was 7 years old and hopes one day she might have the chance to become a published author.

**Second prize: To Know my Country – Julian Hui**

**Written as a eulogy with some beautiful lines, this story is a poignant reminder of how much people leave behind when they move to Australia through choice or circumstance, and how writing and reading can provide a kind of portable home through moments of displacement. Congratulations Julian.**

Julian is a student in Melbourne trying to pass VCE

**Winner: Between sip and sunlight – Misch Ramos**

**This story took a few simple elements – a lemon tree, a grandfather, a garden – and wove them into a vivid story of grief and renewal. It stood out for its gorgeous images and atmospheric writing.**

Mischa Ramos is a writer from Bardia, Sydney, whose work explores family, loss and the luminous details of everyday life. Through writing, they remember, rebuild and uncover how love endures through change and time.

**Adult prize**

**Commended: In the first session, I gather the corners and edges – Britt McCarthy**

**This story immediately commands the attention with its sharp dialogue – both internal and external – between a psychologist and her defensive and semi-famous client. One of those stories that feels complete in itself, yet leaves the reader wanting more.**

Britt McCarthy is a school psychologist and emerging author. She lives, works and writes on Whadjuk Noongar boodja in Perth (Boorloo). In 2025, she had four publications (of flash fiction and memoir) in Night Parrot Press and Bowen Street Press journals / anthologies. She is currently querying her first novel

**Highly commended: A Recipe for Living – Emmi Khor**

***A Recipe for Living* stood out for its originality and the tactile quality of the writing as it channels maternal love and heartbreak in the most unexpected format – a recipe for Cantonese pork trotters.**

Emmi searches for stories in unexpected places, using them to make sense of her world. She hopes that one day, the world will make sense of her words too. Her stories appear in Cast of Wonders podcast, Factor Four, and Fictive Dream magazine. She is a 2024 Aurealis Awards Finalist.

### **Highly Commended: Alien Connection – Tracey Peacock**

**This is a perfectly executed work of flash fiction – urgent, precise, surprising and moving all at once. It’s also a great example of a title that makes you both understand and completely reconsider the story after you’ve read it.**

Tracey Peacock lives in Western Australia. Her work has appeared in the Guardian Australia, The Big Issue, Stereo Stories, Ourselves: 100 Micro Memoirs published by Night Parrot Press, Grieve Volume 11 and has been longlisted for the 2025 Grieve Project.

### **Second prize: The Death Slug – Harper Dent**

***The Death Slug* kicks off with an eerie title and carries the reader from Nepal to Coogee Beach and back again, wondering what will become of this character and the slug that has taken residence on her body. This is a standout story, somehow both uncanny and utterly convincing.**

Harper Dent is an Australian speculative fiction writer. Much of her inspiration comes from the natural and scientific world, stemming from a science background and life lived on a large outback property.

### **First prize: Rita Tognini – The Drift of Things**

***The Drift of Things* charts the slow role reversal of mother and daughter in intimate detail, providing a glimpse into the mostly unseen care work and end-of-life conversations that take place in nursing homes and hospitals as once-strong parents drift away. Tognini’s background as a poet is apparent in her restrained and precise choice of words, conveying ‘the long goodbye’ of dementia in this beautifully observed and somehow timeless story.**

Rita Tognini writes poetry and short fiction. Her work has been published in journals and collections nationally and overseas and has won prizes and commendations. In 2018 she was selected for the WA Emerging Writer Program. Her first poetry collection, *Almost Like Home*, was published in June 2024. <https://wapoets.com/almost-like-home-by-rita-tognini/>