

This year the Katharine Susannah Writer's Centre invited writers from all over Australia to create short stories framed by the prompt – 'The Call'. There were few constraints to a creative interpretation of this theme – namely, a standard prescribed word count and a request for horror tropes and themes. Some of these entries followed a classic horror formula, others deviated from traditional conventions and presentations, but all met the brief. From 65 entries, thirty were shortlisted by staff and presented to me to judge. The quality of the work, the knowledge of genre and cognisance of what makes a great short story was so high, attempting to whittle down to two winning entries and five commended was hugely challenging.

One of the greatest things to ever happen to a writer is to win. In fact, all of the benchmark's success for a writer involve being witnessed – applauded via selection and awarded by placing in competitions and achieving the end goal of publication. And yet, publications and placements are inextricably based on subjective opinion, personal preference and external factors that the writer has no control or knowledge of. For a writer to be on the other side of this process as a judge is challenging; unable to reassure each writer personally to inform them that their work matters. That they should and must persist.

The call to write is after all, a call to fail, a call to succeed and in the words of Zadie Smith – to fail better. Writing is a task that requires ego and ambition – as well as ideas – and yet all writers are by nature sensitive. Throughout this hugely solitary task, it takes such courage persevere and to complete. It takes temerity to submit, knowing it's a lottery every time. And when we open the long-anticipated email, the crush of our heart in our chest, that old familiar deflation, is far more commonplace than the elation of acceptance.

I take this report as an opportunity to tell every shortlisted entrant that I wish I could have been able to deliver that second outcome. Had there been space for all in the anthology, the majority of these entries belonged in its pages. The stories that I read entertained me, delighted me, dismayed me with dark and unflinching iterations of the theme.

To select the winning entries, I walked for hours turning the entries over, thinking of the horror shorts that I read as a child and teen. Stories like *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Lottery*, *Dread and Quitter's Inc.* What were the elements that kept these stories so alive in mind? I realised that it was an indefinable quality, an alchemical blend of novelty, a confidence with genre and a willingness to push the boundaries of horror. Superb writing. Images, scenes, phrases that hooked into me, opened the skin and absorbed into my being. It was on this basis that I chose these entries – I

chose the stories that took up residence in my imagination, and I believe the reader will house them too, for a long time.

AWARD

Commended

1. *The River Nymph* (commended)

Mara Papavassiliou lives in Western Australia, where she is inspired by abandoned mine sites and the gothic landscape of the Great Western Woodlands. She has been published in the Centre for Stories' *Under the Paving Stones*, the *Beach* anthology, *Locative Magazine* and as part of *Writing WA's the little journal*.

The River Nymph is an ambitious, darkly poetic and highly imaginative tale that explores mythology, (female) monstrosity and the often-terrifying mysteries of nature – and the illusion of man's safety and domination of the elements. Sinister throughout, the author plays on the line in a way that can only be described as delightfully gruesome and fatalistic.

2. *Mount Prosopo* (commended)

Liam McKay is a hobbyist writer based on Perth. When not writing he involves himself in many other creative mediums such as through making games and doing amateur theatre and voice acting. This is his first public piece of writing.

A modern epistolary story of a disastrous reconnection with nature, *Mount Prosopo* slowly builds the horror of being an outsider reckoning with increasingly strange locals in an even stranger town, both incrementally and artfully. The ending is exceptional.

3. *Down comes the Night* (commended)

Matt Freeman's debut collection of horror stories, *Old monsters*, was shortlisted for the Richell Prize in 2024. His work has been commended by the Katherine Susannah

Prichard Foundation and the Fellowship of Australian Writers and appeared in Two Wolves Digest and Aurealis. Find him at www.mattfreemanhorrorwriter.com.au.

Down Comes the Night is an evocative, pitch-perfect tale about predation, evil and retribution. It's a classic revenge horror, a white-knuckled ride, which is consistently alive and kicking on the line – full of active language and surprising turns of phrase.

Highly Commended

4. *This is where I Leave you* (Highly commended)

Caroline Michell is a writer from Middle Swan. She loves true stories including crime, memoirs and biographies. Now and then tries her hand at fiction.

This is where I leave you channels frustrated and taboo female desire, relationship entropy and carer's fatigue into a twisted tale of unabashed motherhood, circus sex, and death. With well drawn and believable characters, the wonderfully weird and persistently dark storyline will delight and disturb readers.

3. *Brink* (Highly commended)

Monica Carroll is a horror writer and book artist. Her fiction includes *Girl+dog* investigate: *The Wound* (Dark Cave Press, 2022) and *Isolator* (Recent Work Press, 2017). Carroll's work has been anthologised and published widely. She likes paper.

Brink defied categorisation. Exquisitely written, metanarrative, experimental and wildly clever, *Brink* manages to convey how the imagination can transcend the mundane nightmare of writerly ambition – soulless day jobs, mangled hope and tenacity – only to descend into a surreal nightmarescape of sabotaging alter egos and digital dread.

Second: *The Saint*

TJ Pender is a Perth teacher with a Masters in Screenwriting from Curtin University. She completed the Australian Writers Centre's 2021 Write Your Novel and 2022 Edit Your Novel courses and won a 2024 Kill Your Darlings mentorship. She is an active KSP and PCWC member.

The Saint is a stellar historical noir, imagistic and pacey, with dark, sharp dialogue. While stylistically drawing upon hardboiled detective fiction tropes, horror seeps through exsanguinated bodies, haunted by a femme fatale, who is more ghoul than dame. *The Saint* stood out for mastery of narrative tension and practiced restraint that made it a subtle but stunning genre bending short.

First Place: *Calling the Wound Man*

Jason Bainbridge is based in Queensland, Australia and works in the University sector.

Calling The Wound Man immediately wowed with its originality in concepts, its ability to replicate the horror of the uncanny and to create visceral fear in the reader. Drawing upon urban mythology/folklore exploring themes of revenge, justice and imposter syndrome, this story depicts how self-doubt can conjure very real monsters and bloody consequences. Like all horror short story greats, this story stayed with me long after its conclusion.