

**MY BROTHER JACK
AWARDS 2021**

**SHORT STORIES AND
POETRY**

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Senior Secondary Short Story

Judge's Report – Annette Trevitt

Thank you for entering the short story competition. As always, a pleasure to read your stories.

This year's stories had a diversity of characters from a broken-hearted brother, a ponderous louse, a young woman breaking the shackles of her background to a 18th century romantic.

The art of story-telling is to maintain tension so the reader will want to read on to see what will happen next. A way to do this is to set up early a dilemma or at a point of change for the character.

In a story, I look for:

- a point that matters
- a flawed or troubled character who wants something that's hard to get
- action in scenes I can picture
- a well-controlled structure
- a consistent tone
- clear and visual sentences
- precise and relevant detail
- a nugget of emotional truth
- a crisis/low point that forces the character to act and to change

Short stories show us how a character copes at a point of change in their lives. The character experiences a crisis. This low point forces the character to act and to realise something new about themselves. The character has to earn this new understanding and with it, is irreversibly changed.

Write as close as you can to the way you talk rather than how you imagine a writer should write. Story-telling is a way of communicating with an audience, rather than showcasing a vocabulary.

My biggest tip is to read your sentences out loud. It's an invaluable editing device to pick up typos and repetition and to hear the voice in the story.

Nouns and verbs give life to a story. Adjectives and adverbs can be distracting. The expression 'show, don't tell' means to show the actions and reactions of the characters. Show what happens in the story.

Varied sentence lengths add liveliness to writing too. Short sentences can pack an emotional punch.

If you like humour – use it in your stories. Have fun. Story telling is about connecting with a reader and letting the reader see, through your characters, your take on the world. Trust you have something to say, because you all do. I saw that in your stories.

Congratulations for writing your short stories and submitting them to the competition. Once again, no mean feat in lockdown.

First Place

Stitch by Ella Cairney

The story opens with 'A stitch takes approximately a second to sew.' A sentence that sets the undercurrent of the story.

A beautifully controlled and emotionally restrained story of a young seamstress who is overworked and undervalued. The author takes us through the character's train of thought as she hand-stitches against the clock and realises, she has been daydreaming.

The story opens in action to draw in the reader, and then slowly reveals relevant backstory and comes back to the action where the story takes a turn. We care for the main character when a mishap occurs. In the end, the reader is altered. A fine achievement to accomplish in a short story.

Highly Commended

Pop's Story by Megan Devereux

A character reminisces on her country childhood of piling in her Dad's ute before dawn to see to their rabbit traps. The story is visual and therefore memorable. It doesn't shy away from the reality of their lives. The story captures the warmth of the character's relationship with her father without spelling it out. It is shown in the small details of their shared lives in the country and now, in the city, in their shared yearning.

Senior Secondary Short Story – *First Prize*

Stitch

by Ella Cairney

A stitch takes approximately a second to sew.

Here I sit, doubled over the fold-out table, eyes peeled on the needle. Back and forth.

It's only been four hours, but I've managed to get a lot of work done already. The white tank tops had been finished, and now I'm moving onto the stack of blue butterfly t-shirts. I'm meant to sew the sequins onto the wings. Mr Phan says I'll be good for it, because I have the smallest hands out of all the girls who aren't new.

I trace the print with my finger. I like this shirt a lot. Usually I only get given basics like singlets or leggings, so being trusted with this is a real honour. It's a pretty blue, like the type you see in the sky on postcards for my country.

Right, I have to focus. Sequins aren't meant to be easy, so it's best if I start early to give myself time for error. I thread the needle, and carefully pierce the hole of the sequin, and loop it back through the fabric. I let out a small sigh of relief. That wasn't too hard.

I continue with the sequins, back and forth, back and forth. Sewing is not too difficult once you get the hang of it. After a while it becomes routine.

These long days give you a lot of time to think.

I still remember my first day here, about three years ago. My older brother had gotten laid off, and we needed money. I overheard one of my grandmother's friends telling her about new openings at the clothing factory in a nearby district.

"It's worth considering. I know you want better for Tien, but Hoang Phan is a good boss."

"Isn't she too young?"

"No, many girls start at ten. My granddaughter started sewing at ten too. He won't mind, they don't regulate that stuff too strictly. I know you don't want this, but you need to do this for your family."

My grandma reluctantly agreed and sent me on my way. I was such a baby. I barely knew how to stitch, and was terrified of getting my fingers stuck in the machines. But I've become more used to it, and spending hours sitting and sewing has become manageable.

She doesn't want me working here though, not after what happened to our neighbour. Thu must have only been fifteen, and was working in another place closer to the city when the building collapsed. She got lost in the rubble. I still remember the sound of her mother's screaming the night she found out. I haven't seen her out of the house since that happened. But grandma knows we need the money, and it could be worse. Mr Phan treats the children who work here well, and said that he will increase my pay up to 20,000đ an hour if I stay. Besides, this building has been around for decades, hundreds of people have passed in and out every day. It's solid enough to last a long time.

The sun shining from the dirty windows into my eyes brings my thoughts to a halt. I look up at the clock. A pang of stress hits my chest. Oh no. I cannot believe I've spent an hour on this one shirt. I madly tie off the stitch, and move onto the next one in the pile that is towering over me.

I can't believe I would do this, how could I be so irresponsible? I make a hole in the second shirt's fabric, back and forth, back and forth. Over and over. I tie off the stitch, and pick up another handful of sequins. Back and forth, back and forth. I can feel the sweat building up on my forehead. The sound of sewing machines always has that same droning buzz, but today it feels louder. Like the screaming. Maybe because it's coupled up with the sound of my heartbeat growing more rapid.

Back and forth. What once felt like a dance of my fingers, a comforting motion, like those waves from those childhood beach holidays flowing in and out of the harbour, has become a gruelling marathon. Back and forth. I resent this blue. I hate the sun in my eyes. I hate this t-shirt. I hate these sequins. Back and forth, back and forth, back and fo-

I feel a sharp pain in my finger. I had accidentally poked it with my needle, and now it was bleeding all over one of the butterflies.

Oh no.

“You bleed, you buy” my boss had told me on my first day. I thought it was a joke at the time. I can’t afford to get this. It’s worth more than 4 times my paycheck.

I make my way to the bathroom. Maybe I could wash it out?

The cool water would be more refreshing if I weren’t in this situation. I grab the soap bar and scrub furiously. The blood’s still there. Tying a little slip of toilet paper on my finger, I look at myself in the mirror, face pale, cheeks hollow, eyes tired. I’m tired. I look at the shirt, and how the glassy sequins catch the artificial light. It’s a shirt for little girls, but it could probably fit me. I wonder if it could.

I gently slide it over my head.

It’s funny how a shirt for kids younger than me is more expensive than anything I own.

I snap out of my thoughts again. What am I doing? Someone could see me. The stain wasn’t even that bad. It could be worse. I’ll just cover the blood up with sequins. I have so much I need to do anyway. I don’t have time to be daydreaming. I don’t have any time to worry.

I take it off and run back to my table. I wipe my tear-filled, sequin eyes and get back to work.

Back and forth, back and forth.

Senior Secondary Short Story – *Highly Commended*

Pop's Story

by Megan Devereux

The Mallee was on the brink of dawn, the horizon beginning to turn orange above the red soil. The air was still, leaving the eucalyptus leaves on the gum trees to rest, the morning air crisp and cool.

I pulled my jacket tighter, attempting to block out the biting cold. I sat in my father's wooden chair, just outside the back door of the house, looking out to where the sun had begun to rise. Just past the tin fence, three kangaroos stood beside the pile of firewood, their unmistakable silhouettes unmasked by the sun. I gazed out onto the dew-covered grass, illuminated by the early sunshine. I thought of the mornings in my childhood when I had awoken this early, sleeping in my flared jeans and green button-down in anticipation for the morning.

"Deirdre, wake up"

I didn't need to be told twice. I hurried out of bed and into the kitchen to meet my father.

We would wake in semi-darkness, even before the kookaburras began their song.

Piling into the ute, with the familiar scent of the wet heesian that kept our drinking water cool, we drove into the arid scrub, scorched trees emerging from the earth. I lay in the back seat, a tube of condensed milk filling the void of the breakfast I would have to wait for.

I went with Dad most weekends, and even some school days if Mum let me, while my brother and sister stayed in bed. It made me feel special, getting to spend this time with my father, just him and I. That was part of the excitement of those early morning trips, the actual activities simply a bonus. It felt as though the rest of the world were still asleep, with only handfuls of fruit pickers along the vines having awakened at such an early hour.

I felt the vehicle dip into the water of the creek while I glanced out the back of the vehicle, the murky water splashing onto the windows.

No matter how many times we would drive that route, I always feared that the car would sink into the water below, filled with rogue branches and yabbies. Dad wasn't worried though, he had grown

up on this land his entire life. I remembered a story he once told of how he and his brothers were sent to hunt in the bush. Even on the hottest summer days, he would take his father's hat to shield his face from the intense Australian sun. The brothers would dig up the roots of the box gum trees that littered the dry land, and smoke them for fun along the edge of the riverbank. I had laughed in surprise; Dad never smoked.

The car halted to its usual place under the shade of a gum tree, the wheels crunching over branches and thorns. I hopped out of the car, taking no care to avoid the three-corner-jacks¹ that would litter my shoes. Dad was already around the back, collecting his bags. I looked out to the burrows, my eyes rapidly searching for movement. I found a dozen or so rabbits, violently thrashing in an attempt to free themselves from our traps.

'We got some!' I yelled in excitement.

Catching rabbits, although somewhat inhumane by today's standards, was a relatively easy way to earn money in those days. My father spent his younger years catching hundreds of them, luring them to a watering hole before wringing their necks. Dad would either sell them, or we'd take them home to eat. I remember sitting with him beneath the tin roof in the backyard, watching him slice the carcasses down the middle, emptying the guts onto the dirt below.

The traps were easy, a sharp metal claw laid open along the soil, carefully covered with newspaper, dirt, and branches to lure in our prey. Last night, we strategically placed them right outside the burrows, knowing they would awaken at dawn in search of food, only to have the trap slam shut, fracturing their legs.

Dad still had some traps left over from our days of rabbit hunting. Lately, he had been turning them into wine holders. He had always been a pragmatic man, a craftsman, making sure that nothing goes to waste.

I saw a fox going after one of the rabbits, tearing at its neck, Dad shot at it, watching it go limp. 'You bastard.'

It was always good to find a fox, just their tails would get \$10. We'd heard of some people even picking their mangled bodies up off the side of the highway to Mildura after they'd been made roadkill, hoping to make some extra cash.

I hadn't been out rabbit hunting since I moved to the city. I never thought that I would miss it; the rotten smell of the carcasses, or the way Dad would snap their necks. I realise now that I miss what the city lacks. Rather than the constant sounds of traffic and people, there is stillness in the air at night. The pollution of the city is replaced by the clarity of the midnight sky, and the bright orange

colours of the sunrise are visible no matter where you go, never being hidden by alien concrete structures.

I suddenly heard the fly wire door open, my Dad stepping out onto the deck, carefully closing the door behind him so he didn't wake the house. He slowly walked over, still wearing his father's old hat despite the lack of sunlight. Sitting down in the chair next to me, he looked over and smiled, as if he knew what I was thinking about.

Together, we watched the sun rise over the gum trees.

¹ sharp thorns which grow from invasive weeds that cover the ground in parts of rural Australia