

BNZ Short Story Awards Novice Section
September 2010

Judge: Emma Neale

Notes on the finalists:

FIRST PLACE

'Babysitting' by Chloe Chantal Searle

This story takes on a difficult stylistic challenge, in its attempt to slide between two points of view in a very short narrative space. At times the shift between the two stutters, yet on the other hand, the writer creates two credibly different points of view. There were also one or two moments when the parcelling out of factual information might have been done more neatly. Yet its subject matter has the smack of the real, and exposes the odd power dynamics, the intersection of private and public, in the often uneasy context of looking after someone else's children. In its focus on the strange psychological meet-and-recoil between a young adult and her charges in a babysitting scenario, where the sitter is new to the family, it asks wider, pressing questions about social responsibility. There is a lovely interlude of clownish, crazy playfulness shared by the two main characters, yet when the sitter comes to suspect there's a dark undercurrent beneath a happy family facade, the story rapidly accelerates to the end, in a reflection of the sitter's sense of panic and her rush to get away from a context she's unnerved by.

The babysitter herself is poised on a painful fulcrum of agency and vulnerability, at an age where she's only just taking on the adult world alone. There is an authentically reticent distancing of herself after the babysitting episode, which is both a sign of her immaturity, and yet also in keeping with her personality as a 'people pleaser', afraid to stir up trouble when she faces a moral dilemma, especially when she has no tangible proof of her suspicions. Yet despite her apparent paralysis over the right action to take, the openness of the final lines suggest she retains empathy, and that there is, therefore, hope both for her own development as a citizen-of-the-world, and even for a further connection with the child.

The story leaves gaps which get our own imaginations and ethical sense working, to fill in the silences and absences, puzzling over and independently judging the protagonist's actions. The story is troubling and alluring in that sense: it's unpredictable; it doesn't do all the thinking for us. For this reason, it lingers in the mind, and I think it shows a writer of enormous promise.

OTHER FINALISTS (alphabetical order)

'The Stringer' by Kerry Challinor

A freelance journalist visits India two years after her husband's death, still lost in grief for him. She makes an unplanned visit to Mother Teresa's hospital for the destitute and dying, initially thinking she'll be able to use the experience for a magazine article. The slightly chaotic rhythms of the hospice end up drawing the narrator, Liz, more deeply in than she had ever intended. Calcutta is conjured up convincingly through a sparse yet telling choice of imagery; the dialogue does a great job of exposition and development of the context. There were some minor internal consistencies of implied timeline and character, yet this story was notable for a stunningly beautiful passage about the inexplicable peace brought by a deep, unspoken connection between and Liz, and a young dying woman she tends at the hospital.

'Time Spent in Search of Sugar' By Jill Morris

A woman temporarily living in the small town of Ranfurly goes in search of her lost Labrador puppy, and encounters an elderly couple who have been labelled by the community – and her own family – as eccentrics. I liked the way the writer almost studiously ensures we don't discover Sugar where we fear we might. Although the story does confront us with damage, loss, and the bizarre, it does so with a hand that steers us away from the pull of a kind of Gothic horror lurking in our peripheral vision. It avoids the temptation to tell us exactly how the eccentric elderly couple have arrived at their routines and habits; in this it re-enacts a kind of avoidance that the couple themselves appear to be caught up in: a kind of mutual, yet tender, folly. It becomes a story about isolation and yet compassion; about the lengths we can go to in holding on to a past for some small release from the aridity of the present; and about how to maintain balance and integrity in the face of trauma, be it our own crisis, or witnessing the cost it has had on others.

'Hens' by Rob McFarland

Written from a child's point of view, and set in the 1940s-1950s, it captures a voice of innocence gaining a kind of aged wisdom as the child witnesses his friend's wild, irrational, cruel yet grief-driven response to his mother's death. There are a few wobbles in the child's eye view, I felt, yet there are flashes of humour which enlivened the story and which were refreshing in the context of a predominantly sombre field of entries.

'Limbo' by Sarah Bainbridge

Set in a hospital sterile services department, this story vividly renders a work setting that will be unfamiliar to many readers. It not only unveils one of the more hidden, unpleasant, yet crucial and under-appreciated areas of hospital activity, but also shows the way we often have to carry fraught, complicated personal lives into our working lives, and the strain it can be to maintain the work persona over the tumult of the inner world.

The story skillfully brings in a number of complex, fractured relationships, and is very good at evoking the excitement and strain of a new love affair that has been clandestine till now, and has involved damaging sacrifices. It's particularly powerful in its consideration of the risks we undertake in forming new attachments, of the jostle between selflessness and selfishness in sexual attraction, desire.

The story enters artistically shaky territory in its unflinching descriptions of the abject aspects of the body under distress: its baser products, the body as matter that breaks and decays. It's an area we usually want to turn away from anyway: and the risk is that if we flinch from the lingering descriptive language the author uses, we lose empathy with the narrator's perspective. Sometimes here, the metaphors don't sit easily – but at others, the descriptions succinctly, persuasively convey the character's state of mind: 'I swung around and noticed tiny movements everywhere, things glinting and reflecting, full of menace.'

'It's a Long Way to Navasota' by Claire O'Byrne

Crisp, clear evocative scene setting: strong visual sense of character and context. Set in Texas, the story follows a young white man's bus trip which pushes him up against racist, bullying border control officers. The protagonist's consciousness gradually filters through the descriptive imagery,

which helps to earn the revelation towards the end that he's trying to escape the draft for the Vietnam war.

'The Mock Wedding' by Susannah Frances Poole

A coming-of-age story, vivid with realistic detail of grungy student flats, and the self-consciously alternative trappings of young people struggling at once to question the prevailing norms, and yet also to find a tribe they belong to. On the one hand, individualism, renewal, change, and on the other, the urge to conserve what's still valuable of the past, the urge to find stability, are shown in a kind of hesitant dance here. Eva's apparent conformism and shyness are balanced with a personal sensitivity, and her ability to see through some of her peers' self-inflated revolutionary rhetoric. The story has an interestingly complex take on the two kinds of idealism that jostle in the story. There is the questioning political energy of Eva's brasher flatmates, and the romantic hopes of Eva, who still wishes for some kind of transcendence and transformation through love. She successfully deflates some of the more self-aggrandizing claims from the students who marry as a subversive, anti-government protest. Yet there's also a sense in which Eva has misread one of her flatmates: not registered the latent kindness there all along; and the story's descriptive energy is at its bubbliest when recording the mock weddings, which suggests a clear attraction and even respect for the 'subversive' crowd. The final imagery of Eva angelic in her second-hand wedding dress takes an artistic gamble: is it Eva who still shows a simple naivety, is still absorbing experiences which confront her conformism, or is the authorial voice reverting to a touch of sentimentality?

'The Driver' by Lauren Deacon

This story follows the thoughts of Eliot, an isolated divorcé, during a trip to a motel where he and his wife once stayed together. Although there are several minor things an editor would want to tinker with stylistically, the most important thing is that the character's perspective is maintained flawlessly throughout the narrative voice. The ending is managed masterfully, I thought: I like the way it leaves us see-sawing on a fulcrum of uncertainty, not knowing what Eliot's final decision will be. Yet at the same time, even his simple curiosity about a missed phone call becomes a kernel of hope and warmth, which we can take away and nurture in the earth of our own imaginations.

'In their Blood' By Jane Woodham

A conversation between an adult grandson, Mike, and his grandfather, who have belatedly rediscovered each other. It touches on their common gift for and love of music, and so shows the way emotional inheritance can pick up after it has skipped a generation. Yet where we might expect the story to delve into the metaphorical power of music, it neatly sidesteps into the grandfather's work as a stenographer at some of the most significant historical events of his lifetime. Partly the story is about an artist sacrificing a creative gift for a career that better supports a family; yet it's also about the fact that the work the grandfather chose has a strong moral imperative, as it supports the psychological reconstruction of a society after the Holocaust. The conversation – pared back, colloquial, frank, unsentimental – both manages to let us glimpse the strain of enormous social upheaval, and yet promptly brings us back to the level of one-on-one relationships. I admired the way the writer balanced a sense of the wider social and historical fabric with the characters' present, which was quieter only on the surface.

'THE GOOSE' BY Sylvie R Thomson

The imagery here is beautifully concise and apt; conveying the character's internal mind-scape and yet also having an accuracy that holds true to the physical world beyond the protagonist's perceptions.

A deceptively simple and almost gentle exploration of when love becomes destructive and selfish, an obsession which turns strangely inside out into a kind of negligence. The story makes us ask, if we force the beloved to conform to what we want, does love still earn its name? It also exposes the flip-side of this question, the old adage that there are times when we have to be cruel to be kind.

This author already has a refined sense of how an economical use of imagery, metaphor, simile, can carry an immense emotional freight in fiction: how they work through implication and suggestion, deftly netting mood and nuance. The story captures the way action and gesture may convey more than words in an intimate relationship, and how often the most obvious obstacles or difficulties between us are precisely the ones we don't talk about openly: instead, we unconsciously channel them into other aspects of our lives.