

Flash Fiction Judge's Report

Judging this year's flash fiction competition was an absolute pleasure. There was an incredible range of styles and subject matter. One of the main things I looked for was the presence of an actual story. Something had to happen, some kind of change to the character or in the situation. Some entries were well written but more like anecdotes while others were overly reliant on a single sentence at the end that altered the perception of the events that had just unfolded - sometimes this was really effective, but other times less so. Many entries were clever with great punchlines, many brought a real smile to my face. Others were disturbing and unsettling. One thing is certain: the sheer range made choosing the winners very difficult.

I was very impressed overall with the standard of the entries. Very few were eliminated due to poor writing and major grammatical errors.

There is no one way to write flash fiction and my choices, in the end, are personal, based on those which lingered long after I had read them. I was looking for stories which portrayed change, whether that was in the main character or in the reader's understanding of the situation varies between the chosen stories. All the stories on the shortlist expanded beyond their word counts, hinting at whole worlds that they themselves were only a small but significant part of. There are a great many stories not on this shortlist that I believe will find homes elsewhere and I wish everyone the best of luck with resubmitting them.

Some of the stories required more than one reading to fully appreciate, while others were less impressive on a second read. In the end, the winner, *Self/Less I*, was a story that stood out the very first time I read it. The narrator steadily declines, but in a way which echoed my own experience of watching two parents with dementia. Faculties dim and return, then dim again. It is unpredictable and confusing, and this story made these factors tangible. The title is also works on more than one level — literally! Moreover, it is a story not only told through the words, but also through the placement of those words on the page — and at times, the missing bits of those words or missing words themselves. The confusion, frustration and loss experienced by the narrator really stood out for me, but it was the combination of story and use of visual aspects that made this one the winner.

Blackbird was one story amongst a great selection from one author. The comparison between the past incident and the present gave just enough of a sense of doubt to the truth of the consultant's words. The visual imagery is very clear throughout the story and the sense of melancholy adds to the

feeling that the narrator still does not fully understand what has happened and that there is still more to come in this chain of events.

Boundless was a story that again used the title to great effect — it stood in opposition to the idea of lockdown, both the covid related one and the one experienced by Chloe in the story. The literal and figurative levels overlap constantly and add depth to a rather sad story of both a relationship and lockdown ending.

The two Highly Commended entries were fantastic challengers for the top spots. *You Don't Like Your Dentist* unravels slowly and convincingly. It was disturbing with some great images that made the previous events almost tangible within the story's present. *The Settlement* also used rather disturbing imagery but with a different purpose. The main character in the story in a sense achieves the ultimate fulfilment of his goal and the dystopian setting becomes more understanding because of it.

The Commended entry, *In This Sequestered Place*, was another story that lingered long after I had read it. The title was haunting and captured my interest immediately, and the story was strangely relatable after the events of the previous year and a half.

I'll finish by saying a huge congratulations to all of the winners, and a thank you to all the entrants for the privilege of being able to read your stories. Best of luck in the future with all your writing endeavours!

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