

2013
Outstanding
LGBTQI short story competition

After the Summer



***All the 2013 prize winners and
highly commended entries***



OUTSTANDING

AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER LGBTIQI CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

EARLY IN 2013 a committee was formed to propose a short story competition to replace the lapst Mardi Gras event. The committee (Robert Tait, Rowan Savage, Gail Hewison, Teresa Savage and Laurin McKinnon), called for entries and about 100 manuscripts were received. This publication is the end result. Enjoy!

A special thanks to everyone who helped with this project – to those who sponsored prizes, and particularly those who donated the cash prizes. And an extra special thanks to the authors.

Outstanding was generously supported in 2013 by a grant from LINC

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SPONSORS AND PRIZES:



FIRST PRIZE: \$1000 CASH

plus \$200 workshop voucher and

a one year membership from the NSW WRITERS' CENTRE

plus TWO party tickets to the 2014 MARDI GRAS party

SECOND PRIZE: \$300 CASH

a Kindle ebook reader from POP SHOP,

plus a one year membership to the NSW WRITERS' CENTRE

THIRD PRIZE: \$200 CASH

a \$100 book voucher from the BOOKSHOP DARLINGHURST

plus a one year membership to the NSW WRITERS' CENTRE

HIGHLY COMMENDED: \$100 CASH (EACH)



JUDGES

GAIL HEWISON, proprietor of The Feminist Bookshop 1982 - 2011, OAM in 2006 for services to community and to emerging authors, with long term interest in supporting and reading queer poets and writers.

ROBERT TAIT, author of *Perfect Gay Marriage*, *Trashtown* and *Mardi Gras The Novel*, and is a long-standing member of Sydney's Queerlit community.

ROWAN SAVAGE holds degrees in creative writing and sociology. He presently writes for respected US-based online music magazine, *Tiny Mix Tapes*, as well as publishing in academia, and is interested in exploring the connection between creative writing and criticism.

JUDGES REPORT

WE WERE DELIGHTED to receive 94 stories from all round Australia and from NZ, and that the standard of writing was so high this year. Judges had a difficult task in choosing the winning stories. We also feel that if we had the means to do it, many more of the stories submitted could sit alongside the winners in a book of lgbtqi writing. We were also exceptionally pleased that transgender, bisexual, and intersex themes frequently highlighted our diversity.

It takes a special skill to write a short story and bring it to completion in 750 words. As with poetry, not a word can be wasted. We feel the finalists in the competition all did this well. We found stories that were entertaining, insightful, surprising, emotionally raw and real. Issues important to us all were laid bare without preaching. We loved the way *After The Summer* appeared in so many imaginative ways. Many writers appeared to open their hearts to us, perhaps drawing on their own experiences, and we were moved and felt privileged. As queer judges we felt right at home, our lives as well as yours!

Someone once said that the heart and soul of a community resides in its creative people. This certainly includes our writers, who in telling their stories show us who we are. The importance of this competition is that it makes a space for our voices to be heard.

We hope all our writers will stay in touch, keep writing, and enjoy being a part of this LGBTIQ creative community. We congratulate the winning writers.



RULES:

- * Writing must be your own work, and not previously published
- * Stories should have relevance to the broader Australian LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex) community.
- * Maximum length is 750 words (excluding title), stories over 750 will be rejected.
- * Entries close on: 1 September 2013
- * There is no admission fee for entering this competition.
- * You can submit several stories.
- * The judges' decisions are final.
- * Winning stories (and others as selected by the judges), will be published in a pdf/e-book collection by gay-ebooks.com.au and lesbian-ebooks.com.au soon after the winners are announced. Afterwards copyright reverts to the author.

FURTHER NOTES

Competition launched on 16 June 2013.

Winners announced 29 September 2013.

Judges were not aware of authors' names while judging.

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FIRST PRIZE

Cameron Bayley *Make it work*

IT BEGAN ONLINE.

They were looking for something exciting. OK, OK. *For the bedroom.* Summer and the Mardi Gras season were done, so it was time to stay in. So after looking at all the different temptations in cyber world, they made the choice that would bring me into their home. Me? I'm unassuming. You'll have seen me around and not even noticed.

"This is perfect," said the one with shaggy, dark hair. He looked a little bit like Henry Cavill, like he had the strength of Superman. I looked forward to feeling his tight grip. "I think we've made the right choice," said his partner, who was more Eddie Redmayne. Quieter. Red-blond hair. Reserved. I wanted to put him at ease right away.

"We just want something new, we're sick of the same old same old," they both said, at different times, with slightly different emphases. Henry was all about the *new*, Eddie said sick with punch. I didn't particularly care. I am always happy to be useful. And they had a nice home. Minimal decor, but you could see some personality. A framed *Brief Encounter* poster was particularly spot on, I thought.

Well, things got off to a great start. They were keen, and they worked as a team. Henry was very tactile. I liked how tenderly he would caress Eddie, and say soothing, comforting, sexy words. They played Beyoncé in the background, and lit incense. I have to admit, they were very ordered and

methodical, which I liked. It meant that this would all play out as it should. They passed me back and forth, with care. My assumptions proved correct, Henry's big mitts were like soft leather around me, while Eddie's svelte digits were delicate, tantalising. After an hour, we took a slight break to gather ourselves. "Would you like a glass of wine," said Henry at one point. "Don't mind if I do," replied Eddie, smiling. Oh, there was such promise.

Things got rougher, and tougher, and while I don't like to be vulgar, there was a fair amount of grunting involved. And sweat. I, as always, kept my cool, but I could see that these guys were really exerting themselves. They had their eyes on the prize. It was all about the coming together. "This is so great," Henry said, breathlessly. "It's exactly what we thought it would be like, sometimes you can never be sure." "Do you think?" said Eddie, panting a little. He was flagging, I could tell.

"Aw, fuck!" yelled one of them. And that started it. It got nasty then. I rolled with it. I've seen it all before. There was much profanity, and name calling, even towards me. At times they felt I wasn't working the way they wanted, which was a bit much. You really shouldn't blame the third party. They had such set ideas as to how this would all happen. I wanted them to calm down.

Eventually, sadly, they gave up. They shoved me away. I felt a bit deflated after Henry let me go, his beautiful, caressing hands no longer around me.

I'm sure I heard him call me 'useless' under his breath, which wasn't fair. Eddie came to my defence. "You always do this," he said to Henry, a fire flashing in his eyes which flared when things had started to go wrong. "You take things over and try to make them all go your way. You discount other people's feelings. Have you never noticed that?" Henry grunted, but not in a good, sexy way. The music stopped, the incense burned down, down and out. The air cooled.

"You wrecked this," said Eddie. "You took over, and you wrecked this."

"I don't think you should be so quick to judge," hissed Henry, who gathered himself together and left the room. A door slammed. Eddie ran after.

I was left alone for a long time, a very long time. I know I'm the outsider, but I don't expect to be treated like rubbish. However, rubbish I was.

And so that fancy sideboard, black teak finish, metallic handles, never did get completed. It always had a faint wobble, and one of the doors never closed properly. When they split up, it was put on eBay. I, the trusty Allen key, thrown among the detritus of their domestic life, went with Eddie. But he only ever bought readymade furniture from that time on.



Cameron Bayley is a Sydney based fashion and arts journalist, and pop culture aficionado. He has a penchant for knitting and never, ever says no to a glass of sparkling wine or a great book. His fantasy best friend is Nicole Kidman.

SECOND PRIZE

jenni nixon *joy on the road somewhere*

ON A HOT summer day last year i was going to bondi for a swim when the news arrived.

hope my letter from the bush reaches you. grey nomads on the road they call us. selfish baby boomers using up our kids' inheritance. hope you don't feel that way. things never turn out the way we expect. down the road you turn a corner into a fabulous adventure or a tragedy. who knows? should've told you sooner we were leaving in the campervan. we had to get away. insight can't be taught and we've no time left to fail. mother faye is off bird watching while i sit down to write and she'll be taking pictures so i'll enclose some snaps. she's fond of the strangest things to photograph. concrete laundry tubs and a box of radiant soap powder in a communal laundry or driftwood on windswept sand. old shop signs at a grocery store – wooden *fresh eggs* or a faded *bex. please wash sand off feet before entering dressing room.* faye is ok though her feet hurt. so depressing to see the drought dries everything to dust and then comes the rain and the land suddenly changes red to green. just like traffic lights eh? we had a narrow escape out coonabarabran way. we were bogged and had to be rescued and then wait in convoy until the floodwaters went down. stayed in a local pub they'd just wallpapered. a dirt line was half way up the walls where the water reached. a man drowned diving to fetch a keg from the basement. imagine. must

have been desperate. glad to hear your life might return to normal now that dad is on the wagon. mother faye is happier than i have ever seen her. up early with a thermos and out into the day with a smile. sometimes we go off to a riverbank and fish. been tinkering with the old van and it's working fine. listening to a singer on the radio croon "oh how she could dance back when we were beautiful." how nervous i was on our first whirl around a dance floor. she gave me such a long hug as if she'd never let me go. want to set down some facts. dear daughter mother faye and i love you very much. i guess someone inspires us all and you are our inspiration. held your head high and though you copped some flak from workmates and old friends you didn't flinch or hit back. you maintained your dignity. hurtful things they said. what bullies do. marginalise you. gang up and make you the butt of their jokes and then say they were only teasing and you're expected to laugh at their joke at your expense but when the time was right you had your say without anger you said your piece. faye said yesterday that she felt she'd neglected you as a kid off at work with important meetings that now don't matter a jot and hopes you forgive her for the way she behaved back then. she wasn't happy and lost herself in work. we wouldn't see each other for months. the fights. a bombardment of accusations and resentments but beneath all that controlling anger was fear – fear of losing your mother. "in the end what will hurt the most is not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends."

revd. dr martin luther king jr. he said that. i know you did not stay silent
and that is the way

*

*further to my phone call sadly i finish your other mum's letter. i held her hand
and said farewell to my darling joy. she looked peaceful. we all live with dreams
unfulfilled but she made mine come true. stood up to the old bloke and got us
away on the road. i am so glad he has sought help with his drinking. we knew
joy's ticker was dodgy. sorry that we didn't get to say goodbye the way we would
have liked but we didn't leave things unsaid. that's the main thing. am so sad
cannot write more now. will soon bring her back home. you take care now.
love and best wishes. your mother faye.*

autumn leaves and then winter faded. green shoots sprout in the garden.
my mother is still grieving our loss. i hear her cries in the night. i am
staying for a while.



JENNI NIXON is a sydney poet and performer. published *café boogie* (interactive press 2004). *agenda!* chapbook (picaro press 2009) recent poetry anthologies: *best australian poems, 2009 - 2010*, *out of the box: contemporary australian gay and lesbian poets*, *harbour city poems / sydney in verse 1788-2008* *semaphore dancing & dotdotdash*, *antipodes* phoenix education 2011. *flaunt* lesbian e-books. *seeking the sun* central coast poets (2012) new poems published *southerly* the long paddock 2013 *stoned crows and other aust. icons / spineless wonders* 2013.

THIRD PRIZE

Hayley Katzen *The weight of summer*

YOUR MOTHER'S ULTIMATUM was 'If your weight drops below 45kg you're not going to Cape Town.'

Every morning – after your family had left for the beach with sandwiches and scrabble – you'd weigh yourself, insert the suppository, await its effect and weigh yourself again. In black ink on my notebook's cover you'd drawn a heart around our initials and 'Friends Forever'. So I waited out your morning routine, I consoled you if your weight rose, and didn't contradict your lie about eating breakfast. I towed your line.

I didn't appreciate the seriousness of your weight loss – or my collusion. It had all started so innocuously. We were fifteen, tanning our legs with our long white school socks rolled low, when we decided to go on diet. Mine was short-lived: salad left me hungry and soon I was swiping the left over roast potatoes after dinner. But you really took to dieting, nibbling a carrot for lunch and squirreling your dinner under lettuce leaves.

You did tap dancing and jazz, sang in a husky voice and modeled waistcoats with nothing underneath. Your hipbones began to poke through the lycra leotard and you traced your ribs with your fingertips. Although your long crinkly strawberry blonde hair was thinning, a sheen of hair grew above your lip and on your arms. I played tennis and netball and the lead role in school plays and my stepbrother called me 'BB' which stood for big bum and big

breasts. Beside you, I felt gauche, monstrous, fat.

We were full of bravado – hitching, sneaking into age-restricted clubs, flirting with older guys, smoking and drinking. Or perhaps, you were brave – I followed and mimicked. Although I didn't understand it then, I was like the boys, waiting for the flash of your smile.

We were also wily and determined: we went to Cape Town where my cousin gave us a key to his flat and no curfew. We yelped at the icy Atlantic and sunned our freckled selves on the white sands of Clifton beach, envying the crowds of teenagers. We knew no one; we met no one. We stayed home most nights and went to the beach only once because you were too tired to climb back up the stairs.

In steak houses you dismantled your burger, pecked the gherkin and pushed your plate towards me. I ate twice as much as usual. Most days you ate almost nothing. Except when we bought 'Ouma Rusks' and you devoured the whole box, dunking the toasted bread into black tea. Then you threw up in the pink toilet, again and again. I helped you to bed and sat in the dim light, listening to the traffic, hoping my cousin would come home. I was afraid and lonely. You'd closed in on yourself.

Two months after the summer, you were admitted to Tara, Johannesburg's mental institution, into a ward with boarding school beds and steel bedside

cabinets. Each bed swallowed a teenage girl with shoulder blades like butterfly wings and skinny arms furred with long hair. In a whisper you told me about the girl who climbed down the drain-pipe every night so she could go running, and about the bulimic with the rotten teeth who'd stolen the box of Quality Street from your bedside cabinet. 'They're all high achievers,' you told me proudly. None of them smiled, none of them answered my hellos.

The doctors agreed meditation might help and so we went to the School of Transcendental Meditation in a drafty Johannesburg house lit only by candles. There we were given mantras shrouded in mystery and told to keep them secret.

In the months before you left for the Israeli kibbutz, twice a week my mother dropped me at Tara's high wrought iron gate. I walked across the green lawn, up the cement stairs to the ward and then you led me down the red polished passage to the bathroom. When I asked why there was no mirror on the wall, you told me some girls self-harmed – but you didn't. Together we believed you weren't sick like the other girls; soon you'd recover and return to school. On each visit – despite the continued busyness of our minds, despite discovering that our mantras were identical – we sat cross-legged on the cold floor with our backs against the deep bath and we meditated. It was the only time we were alone. And it was the last time we were best friends.



HAYLEY KATZEN was awarded third prize in the 2011 Mardi Gras competition with her story 'Home at last'; she was also Highly Commended in 2009 for 'What was there for me to tell'.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Gaby Mason *Frankie*

FRANKIE'S BARE FEET padded down the concrete steps then into the red dirt. She rubbed her hand over her puffy face. Her sore eyes squinted in the harsh sunlight. She breathed in the dry heat and looked at the mess her backyard was in after last night. 'Fuck that bitch,' she mumbled as she kicked her way through a graveyard of empties. 'What the fuck am I doing staying with her? What are you doing Frankie?' she berated herself as she got down on her knees and with scratchy, dry eyes started to search in the earth around the fire pit. Her heart was a lump of sore red meat. As her fingers sifted quickly through the dirt details of last night returned as shady images. She remembered the shock as Jess' contorted face lunged at her, suddenly so close. She remembered her fingers gripping her neck. The pain when she yanked it. 'How did that fight start?' she wondered. She traced her finger along the burn mark on the back of her neck. 'Where did she throw it? Try and remember girl.'

Frankie swung around as the fly screen door banged. Jess sauntered towards her, a sarong wrapped low around her waist, her beautiful torso bare, just a sports bra. She carried two mugs of tea.

'Here you go babe,' she said softly as she crouched down beside Frankie placing the mugs on the ground. Frankie didn't move. It took all her energy not to jump on her like a wild cat and tear her eyes out. Jess stroked her dark hair gently. 'Hey Bub, come and sit on a chair. Have your cuppa.' They were

both motionless. 'We gotta talk about this babe.'

Frankie could feel her anger beginning to dissolve. 'How does she do this to me?' She made an effort to rekindle her sense of outrage.

'You're unbelievable,' she said looking at her with watery eyes and shaking her head.

'Come on honey,' her voice was soothing. She slid her hand under her elbow and guided her to a plastic chair. She handed her a cup of steaming tea.

'I fucked up Frankie. You know it's not me when I'm like that. I gotta get some help with this stuff. I need you to help me with this Frankie.'

Frankie's head was buzzing. 'Don't buy it Frankie!' a distant voice yelled. 'She's always like this after a fight.' But Frankie disregarded the voice.

'What are you gonna do?'

'I'm gonna see that doctor, get some help. Will you come with me tomorrow?'

Frankie was still, she could feel some warmth building in the pit of her belly.

'OK,' she said softly, melting into a smile.

Jess stood and wrapped her arms around her from behind, kissing her on the top of her head.

'I'm gonna have an ice cold Corona. Hair of the dog,' she whispered into her ear. 'Want one?'

Frankie could taste the cold beer. She could feel it wash all this sadness

and hurt right away.

‘Sure.’

As she heard the whack of the flyscreen door that voice in her head spoke again, but louder this time. ‘You’re sick too, Frankie. You just can’t see it.’

This thought unsettled Frankie. She stood up quickly knocking over the cup of tea. ‘Shit,’ her heart had started to race. She looked up at the big blue cloudless sky. A flock of black crows swooped and looped, their sharp, insistent ‘craw, craw’ stirring Frankie. ‘They look like a bunch of drunks,’ she thought as the big, heavy lumps of birds landed clumsily on the old boab tree next door screaming and making an unholy racket.

As she bent down to pick up her cup she saw a glint of reflected light. She dug into the dirt pulling out her gold chain with the heart shaped locket. Her fingers curled tightly around the broken chain and she held it to her chest. She looked upward ‘Thank you,’ she whispered. The defeated sadness that she had felt all morning began to shift and move inside her and she felt something new. It was a small tender feeling of care for herself. Almost like she was someone else.

She looked around the filthy yard littered with beer cans and cartons and chip packets and cigarette butts. ‘I’m gonna look after you,’ the voice in her head was gentle now. ‘We’ll start by walking out that gate.’



GABY MASON has recently discovered a passion for writing fiction. This is her first short story competition and she is greatly encouraged to be selected for this publication. She enjoys writing about how we long for connection and love and how we stuff it up. How we destroy ourselves and how we heal.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Isobel Harding *Miss Preston*

'SUMMER'S OVER KIDS. Time to get to school,' Mum calls to wake us up. She's happy because she got a job working in the supermarket behind the deli counter.

My brother Rick doesn't like school. He gets into trouble. My sister Gem is in Year 3 and I am in Year 1. Today is our first day at our new school.

My new teacher is tall and has short dark hair.

We are drawing pictures in class of something that happened during the summer holiday. I am drawing us moving house in the car and trailer with the van with our beds and boxes in it. All the pencils are sharp and there are lots of yellow, which is good because it is my favourite colour and at my last school we didn't have many yellows.

Miss Preston comes round to see our work. She says my picture tells a big story and asks me if I like my new home. I say yes quickly and carry on working. She is really tall and has long arms and big hands and looks a bit like Uncle Pat.

Miss Preston has a really little guitar. She says it is small enough for koalas to play. It only has four strings and she says it's called a ukalilly or something like that. We sing *If you're happy and you know it clap your hands* and she plays it. Then we have reading groups. I am in the koala reading group so maybe I can play it one day too.

We have assembly. There is a teacher with a sparkling top on and one with a skirt and yellow glasses and one that looks like she is from the Olympics. There is a man teacher with a tie on and another with a grey jumper and black pants. Miss Preston is wearing a green jumper and blue pants. When she sits down I can see she has brown and yellow stripy socks on like a giraffe. She looks like the men teachers. I try to imagine being really long and having long arms and legs like Miss Preston. It's hard.

We go into the playground to have lunch. I have a buddy to play with to show me where to go. We watch the soccer. Miss Preston is playing with the bigger children. Rick is there too. Miss Preston juggles the ball in the air for a long time. Everyone is counting out loud and when the ball hits the ground they are at 34. Rick looks happy. I think he likes my teacher.

Miss Preston tells us really funny stories. Sometimes from books and we look at the pictures, but the best are the made up ones when we are all in it. I was a big bear today. I had to roar at the children in my cave and they had to scream and run away. I tried to be really big to make my legs stretch but I am still really little. I liked roaring at them. I looked at Miss Preston and roared and she laughed too.

People in the playground say that just because Miss Preston has short hair it doesn't mean she's a man and that boys *and* girls have long hair if they

want to. In assembly one of the school leaders told us to celebrate our differences. She said we live in a multicultural society and we should respect other people. I don't really know what that means.

I look at my teacher and feel happy. She is different from the other teachers and I really, really like her.

Auntie Anne comes round to cut our hair.

'How do you want yours little one?'

'I want it really short,' I say. 'I like short hair.'

And then I *do* have short hair and I really like it because I don't like hair tickling my face.

At school some children run up and say, 'Short hair, boys hair.' And run away again. I go and make a world out of sticks and stones and mix the sand and dirt until the bell goes.

Miss Preston sees me in lines. 'What a lovely smart haircut,' she says smiling.

I look up at her and smile back. 'My Auntie Anne cut it.'

'Well, she did a great job,' she says.

I get my fruit and my home reader and sit outside my classroom. I can't wait to see what happens next.

ISOBEL HARDING finds it hard to choose between reading, writing, making music, bushwalking and photography. Through her writing she is exploring spaces that are close to her heart.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Kay Harrison *Banana Palms*

IT'S THE FINAL night of the summer holidays. The beach bonfire. The pile of sticks on the sand has grown steadily over the last few weeks, the sun sucking the moisture from the gas-white branches. The day expires in stagnant heat.

We're crouched down the side of the Kombi van, shitting in the dust together. We've been killing time, smoking spliffs in the dunes. Shitting outside seems a funny idea. The glossy abundance of blue-black leaves, huge elephant-eared fronds and green bunches of bananas.

'You look fuck-awful,' I say again. 'Seriously. What happened to your face?'

He's bruised blue-black, the marks stretch round his arms and across his chest, the raw welts on his legs.

He shrugs, pulls up his dirty grey Y-fronts. 'Just a bit of a tête-à-tête with Dad.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'He reckons Yoko brought the Beatles down. My take is it was all about ego.'

He is laughing.

'Are you okay?' I ask. He's laughing like a crazy man. 'Seriously. You've freaking lost it.'

He's hooting and jumping around like an ape. Then he launches himself on me and we're wrestling on the blanket of pine needles.

‘Get off me, you freak!’ I scream but he’s just laughing delirious.

He gets a few digs in hard. And we’re butting up against the taut ropes, the tent pegs that are holding the awning extending out from the van in place.

‘Oy! Watch out for the shit!’ I yell.

I can smell it: the rich, fresh excrement mixed with the wet smell of fridge, kerosene, baked beans coming from the tent. That’s when he smashes me across the face.

‘What the fuck?’ I yell.

And I can’t see. My head is throbbing from the blow and I’m flailing, lashing out with my fists, trying to hurt him. He grabs my wrists and pins me to the ground, my puny wrists that couldn’t hurt anyone. I’m crying or it’s blood or there’s something dripping. But I can’t feel my body. Then he’s holding my face between his cool palms.

He leans in and kisses me. The scratch of his chin. His Tooheys New T-shirt worn soft as skin. It’s indescribable. And for a second I surrender. Then I baulk, push back, swinging my puny fists. I make contact. Again and again.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ I scream. ‘You fucking poofter!’

But he’s not punching me back. I keep going. I can taste the blood dripping down the back of my throat. My arms slow finally and stop. We are standing on opposite sides of the banana palms staring at each other.

I see the welts, the bruises, his eyes in his wolfish face.

‘Jesus H. Christ.’ He scowls at me. ‘You need to relax! It was a joke, alright.’ He turns and walks away. ‘I’m going for a spliff. Why don’t you fuck off home to Mummy?’

After the summer I will remember this. After the beach bonfire has changed everything. Its silhouettes rising in the burning teepee of smoke. The crack of wood. The sea, a flat, pewter gray. The ghetto blaster on a broken sandcastle and the shouts of beach footie. And him crouched down on the outer edge, his dark hair masking his face. The lick of smoke from his mouth.

I will remember the breakfast cereals in Tupperware on the foldout table in his parents’ tent, the captain’s chairs, his Dad’s fishing gear, the kerosene lantern, the dog-eared checkers board, the tri-legged barbecue outside the zippered door, its UFO lid barnacled with rust. I will replay this scene endlessly in my head. The flies circling the fresh faeces.



KAY HARRISON is a full time content, feature and copywriter. She collects jam jars, academic degrees and tawdry dreams in the hopes of turning them into something useful someday. Since her release from her Aust Lit masters this year, she has been channeling her inner Stepford wife. When she's not bent over a bubbling pot, she's devouring music, drinking wine and disappearing the walls of her home, one novel at a time. Art galleries, Haigh's chocolate and the evening news are sources of inspiration. On the weekends she tends to her two ginger moggies and her patch of fake grass.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Madeline Shaw *SALT*

EACH YEAR, AFTER the summer, Doreen, does two things. She dries her red Speedos, sports cross back and three stripes down one side, in the backyard sunshine for a whole day until they are warm and crisp. These are the swimmers that Doreen dons at six every morning, along with her metallic anti glare goggles for the pinky dawn sunlight.

Doreen loves salt. Even as a kid down at Xiamen Beach. Others would jump into the shower after a swim, complaining about the salt in their eyes and sand in their pants. Doreen would just sit, wrapped in her warm red and white striped towel with a fringe, her salty short black hair sticking out at right angles to her head. Some days, if they had been at the beach all day, salt would be caked on her skin. She loved to lick her finger, press it against her skin and then suck the salty, sandy grains. Almost as lovely as salty plums.

Now, at eighty-two, salt doesn't gather on the surface of Doreen's skin but lies in between the regular deep creases, like it does on the dry rock platforms when the tide is out. It still doesn't give her any trouble – salt. A day that ends with her brown skin caked, still goes down as a perfect one.

Doreen's second after the summer activity begins on the 373. A robust hurtle towards the Haymarket for a box of Jahe Wangi Instant Ginger Beverage. Doreen has relied on this zingy little system warmer for the last 27 years, since she discovered it, and has never had a flu since.

As usual, the trip on the 373 is fraught with adventure. Today's driver takes the corners with a kind of hectic closeness to the kerb or an unusual distance from it. Since a fall and a fractured wrist two years ago, Doreen has perfected the sideways skateboard style flexible knee position; essential for remaining upright on a city bound bus.

Doreen's wife, Cass, is not in favour of Doreen taking the bus, particularly since the fall – but Cass was also not in favour of their cycling trip through Mongolia in 2003, which turned out to be their best adventure yet, nor of Doreen's choice to purchase a moped last year rather than a Mazda sedan. In a rare moment of compromise, Doreen did agree not to take the moped into the city. Doreen is not in favour of Cass' insistence on XXXX Gold as her beverage of choice, especially as autumn comes on, nor of her penchant for all things Abba, but they both learnt long ago that difference is the juice.

Doreen and Cass married in 2015, after the government finally succeeded in getting same sex marriage through. They had a humble affair by the pool, then a speedboat trip to Magic Point to watch the whales travelling north. They honeymooned in Mozambique, visiting a childhood friend, Wei, whom Doreen had grown up with in Fujian. Doreen had not seen Wei since the end of second grade when Wei's father, a doctor, had taken an aid position in Mozambique and the family had remained ever since.

Doreen survives today's bus trip and brings home not one but two boxes of Jahe Wangi (anticipating a cool autumn with sea breezes) eight prawn dumplings, a bunch of bak choi, two lotus seed buns and a jar of pickled ginger. As she unlatches the gate, Doreen notices that the leaves of Steve and Mike's Illawarra flame tree next door are newly tinged with orange.

Doreen heads to the kitchen, places the prawn dumplings into a bamboo steamer for lunch and puts the other shopping away. She turns the tide calendar over as she walks out to the backyard and the dry swimmers on the line. Doreen holds the hot fabric against her face and then folds the swimmers carefully. She places them into a cotton drawstring bag and then into the sports drawer where they will stay for winter – a sense of satisfaction that she has swum through another summer and that her body is strong and well.

In a while, Cass wanders in and gives her a homecoming kiss.

"Mmm... just as I suspected... salty," Cass remarks and smiles as she notices that Doreen has laid out autumn swim wear on the chair for the morning – blue boy shorts and a long sleeve thin wetsuit top, ready for the autumn dawn.



MADLINE SHAW loves to write short stories which celebrate the ordinariness and specialness of everyday moments. She has previously been a joint winner of the Limnisa Short Story Competition (2010) and a prizewinner in the Mardi Gras Short Story Competition (2011).



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