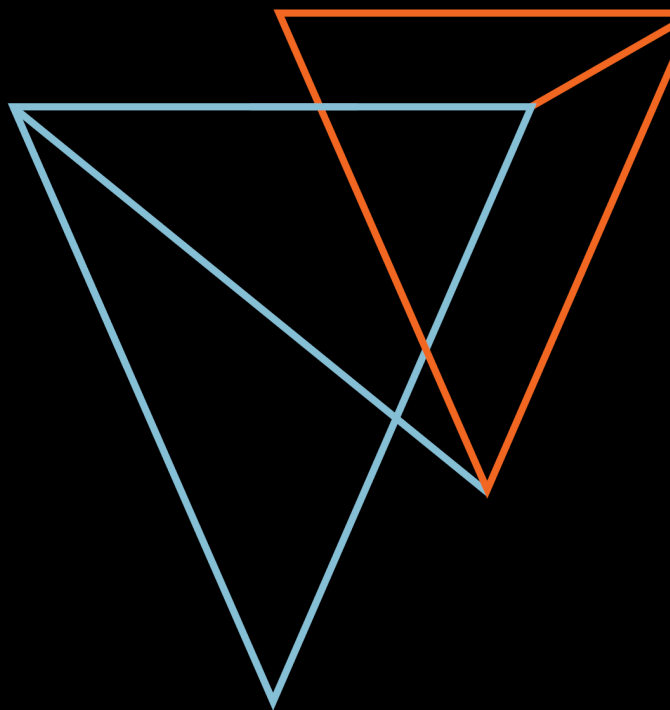


NILLUMBIK PRIZE CONTEMPORARY WRITING

ANTHOLOGY 2020



ARTS AND
CULTURE



Nillumbik Prize
Contemporary Writing
Anthology 2020

Nillumbik Shire Council
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ARTS AND
CULTURE



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Judges' Report:

Fiction / Alan Marshall Short Story Award

Local and regional writing prizes are a gift: they encourage new and emerging writers to work toward a goal and take massive leaps of faith in their abilities. Having the chance to develop your craft and your voice at the early stages of your career and have it nurtured by prizes such as the Nillumbik Contemporary Prize for Writing is vital. It can feel like an insurmountable challenge to go from creating short stories on your own to immediately putting them out into the world. Having opportunities such as this prize gives all writers a stepping stone, not only to grow as artists and hone their craft but to be inspired to keep going.

The entries we read for the Nillumbik Prize Short Story Award, Youth, Local and Alan Marshall Short Story Award (Open) categories showed a range of talent that was as diverse as the subject matters found in each story. We were overwhelmed by some of the quality of the entries and we are eager to see how these writers develop over time.

If we were to give general feedback to all writers (regardless of if they entered this year) it would be this: read more short stories from authors who express this artform in varied, interesting and beautiful ways. A short story is more than an extract from a novel or a set of lovely crafted images and prose. Short stories are more than small moments. They're more than a 'gimmicky' idea with pyrotechnics. They have a heartbeat that pushes their narratives from beginning, middle, and end while exploring the world and characters and ideas presented to the reader. Mostly they have structure and are often unforgettable. It sounds like hard work (and it can be) but we read so many entries that were able to achieve this and we were often moved, as readers, by the depth and promise of each story and their writers.

The other piece of advice we give everyone is to always redraft your stories before sending them off for publication or prizes. Sadly,

a lot of entries read as first drafts and while we could see their potential, they did fall short. Redrafting allows you to develop the story technically and pushes you as a writer to dig deeper and push your abilities. You will feel more satisfied as an artist when you do this and you will stand out more! If you're writing outside your direct experience, do your research and think about your characters as subjects rather than objects. Give them humanity and complexity, allow them to be and their situations to be complicated if need be. Explore that murkiness. Ask yourself, 'Is there another way I can tell this story? What is it that I'm trying to say or show here?' There were a few stories that took on hard-hitting subjects but they came across as cliché for this very reason.

More than anything we want everyone to keep going, keep developing. It was utterly inspiring to read work from new and emerging writers of all ages and to know that there is a new wave of talent ready to tell stories that connect with readers everywhere.

Youth

We loved the insights into the minds and imaginations of the next generation of Australian writers. We were moved and entertained. As expected, there was a fair bit of emulation, and while technically good, some of these stories lacked emotional weight. It was for this reason that the winning story, *Hiraeth*, stood out above the rest. While ambitious in its scope, the prose focused on the main protagonist and drew her, and her world, in beautiful and believable detail. The prose was pared back and simple, but all the more evocative for its restraint. We were also impressed with the choice of second-person narration to explore the fall out of a global, environmental crises that felt urgent and timely. Here is a writer with great potential. We can't wait to see what they do next.

Local

The standard of entries in this category was high. It was exciting to see stories which experimented with form amidst the more traditional linear narratives. A few of the stories read like early drafts and would have benefited from some rewriting and editing. There were two stories in particular that captured the attention and hearts of the judges. These were: *The Early Settlers* and *Work Experience*. *The Early Settlers* demonstrated a skillful building of suspense and a unique, compelling voice. *Work experience* exhibited a mastery of the short story form. Told in forensic detail, through a series of detailed but unsentimental vignettes, the writer has created an absorbing narrative with a convincing and memorable voice. In particular the sense of place and character, how they experienced and viewed the world, and how it was used to structure the narrative, was what made this story stand out so much.

Open

What an amazing crop of submissions. We were impressed with the ambitious nature of many of the pieces and it was heartening to see some stylistic and structural risks being taken. There was great diversity in genre and subject matter, which made for entertaining reading. Unfortunately, some stories were let down by their endings. The judges agreed that many of the writers would benefit from reading more short stories. *Show Don't Tell*, the winning piece, boasted an ending that was both satisfying and ambiguous. The story itself felt complete and it was very assured and accomplished storytelling, highly nuanced and textured. While it featured beautiful and often funny prose, *Show Don't Tell* also had a compelling narrative arc with a convincing and moving shift in character.

- Melanie Cheng & Sarah Schmidt

Alan Marshall

The short story chosen as the winner of the open section of the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing receives the Alan Marshall Short Story Award. Now in its 35th year, the award celebrates excellence in the art of short story writing.

The award honours the life and work of Australian literary legend and former Eltham resident, Alan Marshall.

Fiction: Open

Alan Marshall Short Story Award, 2020

Show Don't Tell

Dominic Amerena

Eyeball (v): to read something quickly.

"Can you eyeball this email before I send it off?"

"Show don't tell, this part really needs to pop." My Submissions Manager said. David was 50-ish, cadaverous, a long-suffering Saints fan. He wore a Fitbit and paisley ties and had strong opinions on border security. David's two-year-old wasn't sleeping which meant that David wasn't sleeping, which meant that David was more likely to grill me about my copy when, red-eyed and tow-headed, he arrived at the office where I'd been working for the last six months, writing tenders for the construction company whose name I'm not at liberty to reveal.

Once David had stalked out of earshot, Elise swivelled her chair to face me. "Next he's going to say, 'Write what you know.' Or: 'Find your voice.'"

She'd been full-time for the last two years. We knew each other from our early-twenties, where we'd met in an undergrad writing course. We spent our time at pubs around campus, describing the novels we'd write, that would speak to the now we were living in. We considered ourselves brash and brilliant, a feeling which evaporated as soon as we set foot in the classroom. I still recall the shame I felt reading my work out loud, Elise's tears on the South Lawn after class. Eventually we learned how to hide our feelings while the other students picked over our work. We affected a posture of louche detachment, rolling our eyes and leaning back on our chairs. In time, we learned to feel nothing at all.

Ten years later it was still us against them. Unlike the other people in the office, we possessed a secret knowledge about the brutal mechanics of the real world. We alone could perceive the banality of our labour and kept ourselves as detached as possible from the inner workings of the office, lest we became subsumed, lest we began to believe that we were there for the long haul. Having Elise there made it feel like everything we said was contained in quotation marks, like we were characters in a bad short story, a parable about what happens when words are converted into units of capital. Having Elise there made it seem almost bearable.

The company's unofficial motto was: *Bid first and ask questions later*. My job was easy for the most part: activating passive sentences; copy-and-pasting material from previous bids and re-working it to fit the briefs I'd been given. Whether it was building the new wing of a children's hospital or a maximum-security prison, I deployed the same cheery, amorphous language I'd used in a past life, writing grant applications for the aforementioned novel, which I never completed, though I am, theoretically, still writing it.

Now I wrote about paradigm shifts and wide-reaching benefits for Melbourne's transport network and the carceral system of the great state of Victoria, instead of the novel. I removed Oxford commas and dangling infinitives and double spaces at the ends of sentences, left by boomers who'd cut their rotting teeth on the keys of typewriters.

I was giving myself one year to do no good in the world, in which I would tamp down my finer feelings and exist as a diligent scrimper. I had conceived of a clean, well-lit space in the future, where I would resurrect my novel and become the writer I had always presumed myself to be, only with savings and super and a wardrobe full of active wear.

My life was a dread-fest, save for the eighty laps I swam after work at the pool at Victoria University. I hurtled my body through time and space — 60, 80, 100 laps of freestyle. At the end I felt aerated in impossible ways, walking through the lamp-lit Footscray streets,

sodden leaves littering the pavement and the smell of diesel from Ballarat Road hanging in the air. When I arrived at my tiny unit on Droop Street I felt so bloodless and barely there that I was able to fall, almost immediately, into a dreamless, pneumatic sleep.

Before lunch David appeared at my desk to inspect my handiwork. "On a scale of one to ten, how dazzled can I reasonably expect to be?" He commandeered my mouse and scrolled through the word document.

David was an outline, a cut-out, a character too flat to exist in fiction, despite my best efforts. For the last few weeks I had been waking while it was still dark and sketching out scenes from life in the office, *cubicle vignettes*. The story about David's sleepless child was something I had come up with to give him more weight. In other iterations David lived with a schizoid father or a wife who stared at the wall all day. Sometimes David was a fetishist or an alcoholic, an avid horticulturalist. In truth I knew nothing about him, save what could be seen on the surface.

In real life David was craning over my shoulder, scanning the paragraph describing our proposal for the upgrade of a train station in Melbourne's northwest.

Safety is the bedrock of our business. Accordingly, we have adopted a stringent Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) approach for the Watsonia Station Upgrade, which will place physical features, activities and people in ways that maximise visibility and optimise the ability to spot suspicious persons or people and prevent instances of unauthorised sleeping.

Soak time (n): a period in which to ponder something deeply. *"The delivery team is going to need plenty of soak time to get their heads around these changes."*

The Tuesday morning kick-off session was in Meeting Room Six. The team was discussing win themes and show stoppers to secure the

contract to build a stretch of freeway, which we'd deemed: *the missing link in the state-shaping project to create a better-connected Melbourne*. Everyone was there: engineers and urban designers and lower-middle-managers. They were a pleasant enough bunch for the most part, fine company to share a cup of tea with in the immaculate break room overlooking the Yarra. I chatted with these Simons and Michaels and Malcolms and Davids about the Pies' chances for the Premiership and the Libs' chances at re-election and the relative merits of different private schools in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. We endured morning teas and shave for a cures and after work drinks. It was clear they didn't seem to find their jobs humiliating or banal, which I suppose was a good thing, though it made the gulf between us feel wider.

The engineers were consistently amazed by my ability to convert their technical data into limpid, digestible text. They called me their wordsmith, their maestro; they praised my purple prose. It was the most generous feedback my writing had ever received.

David gave his stump speech before the whiteboard about our strategy going forward. I wrote that our team was against Business as Usual (BAU), we were anti-by-the-book. I wrote that our stakeholder engagement team was primed to proactively liaise with community members to ensure that the residential relocation process proceeded as smoothly as possible. In other words: we would do everything in our power to minimise the fuss kicked up by residents displaced by the freeway.

Over Cheeky Chook Poké Bowls in the Collins Square food court, Elise and I added to our Dictionary of Degraded Language, a list of terms and acronyms that we had been compiling since the beginning of the year. Through mouthfuls of edamame we ran through the highlights from David's speech, coming up with working definitions where we could.

We wrote the book by hand, which we thought gave it a patina of seditiousness. The Dictionary was our manifesto, our document of re-

sistance, displaying our disconnection from the dailiness of our lives. A part of me was aware that were becoming cruel, though another part of me would have described it as the actions of people who saw the world for what it really as: a bad joke with no punchline.

Thumbsuck (v): to carefully consider a proposal or proposition. *"Let's thumbsuck the various options and reconvene after lunch."*

After Wednesday's shift I met Elise at the Southern Cross Hungry Jack's. It was a balmy, mid-May evening and we ate our Double BBQ Bacon Stackers on the concrete bollards at the entrance to the station.

"As well as preventing instances of vehicular terrorism," Elise said, "these innovative bollards offer customers a practical tabular sustenance facilitator, also known as a table."

Though I wasn't exactly in the mood, I tossed a bacon rind to a seagull perched on the kerb and said: "They enable an industry leading al fresco dining experience, amongst Melbourne's diverse avian communities."

And we both knew that it was a joke but then again it wasn't that we were eating our burgers on concrete structures erected to prevent cars plowing into the bodies of commuters, and we were eating there because all the benches had been removed from the concourse to better funnel people in and out of the station, to discourage the wrong types of bodies from loitering on the *plaza*, to stop them sleeping or sitting for a few minutes to catch their respective breaths.

"Violence is how money and bodies meet," Elise said as we walked pubwards down Collins St. "I can't for the life of me remember where I read that."

Her words were a keyhole into an Elise that I seldom got to see, one who I remembered from those first few days of uni. We used to think that language was life and death and love and pity and bright red balls bouncing down stairs, answers to questions we'd never known to ask. When did we begin to use our sentences to inoculate ourselves against the world?

We radiated a small, weird heat as we strolled downhill, our arms so close that they almost touched. I wanted to stay in the moment, but in no time at all we were at Lounge and I went to find a table in the crowded smoking area and Elise went to the bar. She was grinning when she returned clutching a jug, and I knew that everything was back to normal.

"I forgot to mention the latest *bon mots* from our fearless leader," Elise said. "Drum roll please... David and I were running through the freeway submission, which is reading rather well if I don't say myself, when he turned to me and asked whether I thought our approach was sufficiently bleeding edge. That's bleeding with a b. As in: our approach is so cutting edge that it draws blood. And naturally my mind leapt to the phrase 'blood on our hands' which is not exactly the connection we want our clients to make, especially with all the *working families* that may or may not be displaced by our little stretch of freeway. But then again who am I to judge? Now please pass me the dictionary, because I want to get this down while I'm still in the muse's grips."

I rifled through my backpack but came up empty handed.

"I probably left it at home last night," I said. "I was trying to work some Davidspeak into a new story."

By jug four I'd explained my theory of writing, as it currently stood, about our violent language, our money-drenched language, our banal, degraded language. I had the hunger again, the hunger to make something real. As I told Elise, yelling to make myself heard over the din of after work drinkers, I wanted my novel to be about work, about the small bargains we make with ourselves to get through the day, the networks of power and complicity that we were all enmeshed in. I told her that this was all research, it was temporary, a necessary sacrifice. I was hopeful, grinning, wasted. At the end of my speech Elise poured the last of the beer and said:

"You tell yourself it's only temporary, but it gets less temporary every day."

Rightsizing (v): To reduce the size of a company, by shedding staff. *"This department could do with a healthy dose of rightsizing."*

I have all the time in the world to write now but something has been holding me back, something other than the letter I received a few weeks ago that threatened "vigorous legal proceedings" if I disseminated information pertaining to the intellectual property of the company's tendering processes.

Lately I have settled into a routine: swimming in the morning while it's quiet, a long walk by the Maribyrnong, meals of pulses and ancient grains. I spend the rest of the time not writing, pottering around my unit, which I can afford until the end of the year, if I'm frugal.

I am waiting, if that's the right word, for an opportunity to present itself, for a new way in to emerge. Elise calls once in a while to check up on me. She feels bad about what happened. She says that she envies me, though I'm not sure I believe her.

I left the Dictionary of Degraded Language on my desk when I went to meet Elise at Hungry Jack's, that mid-May evening a few months ago. Apparently David came across it the following morning. I had been pulling on a pair of pants, mortally hung over, when the call came through. His voice sounded softer than I'd expected, sad almost, when he told me to clear out my proverbial desk. He told me it was a shame the way things had turned out.

I think about David when I'm swimming. I try to imagine what it felt like to see himself in those dingy, handwritten pages; to see his words trussed up and put on display. Did he feel shame, as I do now, sitting at my makeshift desk; as I feel when I'm swimming, plunging down a never-ending tunnel, swimming like water like work like writing like digging a hole and filling it in.

I recently enrolled in a twelve-week course that will teach me how to become a lifeguard. According to the website: *The certificate is an*

entry-level professional qualification that can lead to an exciting career in the aquatic and recreation industry. When I am drifting off, I imagine a different version of myself sauntering along the edge of the pool in my yellow windcheater, listening for sounds of distress. It's a cliché: the aesthete finding solace through the labour of his body. Too banal for words. But still I imagine what it would feel like to use my body to care for another body in peril. I imagine it would be indescribable, though I am sure that I will try.

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Thanks to Nillumbik Prize partners, Yarra Plenty Regional Library, and to the Mayor, Councillors and Communities of Nillumbik who continue to support arts and creativity in the Shire through initiatives such as the Nillumbik Prizes for Contemporary Writing and Contemporary Art.

Thanks to all the writers who entered this year. You demonstrated the commitment to creativity that will be so important to the coming recovery period.

Special thanks to this year's fantastic judges: Jeff Sparrow and Claire G. Coleman (Creative Non-fiction), and Melanie Cheng and Sarah Schmidt (Fiction).

Finally, thanks to our wonderful readers: Vicky Booth, Cath Hart, Elizabeth Vercoe, Stacey Warmuth, James Elias, Laura Lidker, Jessica Over, Kylie McCormack, Emma Roussel, Alli Spoor and Jesse Morgan.

“As all our certainties collapse around us, we need truth, more than ever, but we also require writers with the poet’s ability to turn a phrase and make the familiar feel strange and the strange, recognizable... It was reassuring, therefore, that the competition received such a strong field of entrants... works that were informative, moving, provocative or funny – and, on occasion, all at once.”

Claire G. Coleman & Jeff Sparrow
(Creative Non-fiction Judges Report)

“... opportunities such as this prize give writers a stepping stone, not only to grow as artists and hone their craft but to be inspired to keep going... We were overwhelmed by some of the quality of the entries and we are eager to see how these writers develop over time.”

Melanie Cheng & Sarah Schmidt
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