



Peter
Cowan
Writers Centre

Supporting writers of all ages and abilities

**600 word short story
competition 2021
Winners**

Julian Cowan Youth Award

PLEASE HOLD BY EVA MUSTAPIC

The fast-approaching night is crisp and briny, and I cling to the repetitive ring of the phone like a lifeline. I thought camping would be all toasting marshmallows, singing campfire songs and telling scary stories, not hiking for hours and then getting lost. Alone. Luckily I found the old phone box, there for people just like me. Its red paint is peeling, its glass dusty and cracked and its light refusing to flicker on, but the phone took my change.

Ring, ring, click.

“Park ranger.”

“Oh, thank god. I’m lost-”

“Hold please.”

I blink. “Oh.”

Tinny music starts to play.

“Marvellous,” I mutter. I peer through the glass panes at the darkening landscape around me. I’m at the edge of a large, still lake, and the gentle ripples of the wind on its surface catch the last of the light, the sun having dipped behind one of the ragged, towering hills all around. The landscape has a cold beauty, untouched by man except for the road, the phone box I’m using, and a small pier that juts out into the lake, perhaps for use by fishing boats in the warmer months.

Just as the last of the sun disappears, I spot two steady yellow headlights approaching, parting the deepening sea of twilight to let the car glide through. It stops by the water and idles. After a moment, another car is revealed as it creeps forward through the headlights. I glimpse a crumpled bonnet.

It crawls onto the pier and stops at the end. I furrow my brow. The driver’s door opens, and the car is lit up from the inside. A man unbuckles his seatbelt and steps out, and a woman remains seated inside, her seatbelt on and her head lolling against the door. She looks as if she’s asleep. The man moves to the back of the car and begins to push. I watch in silent, helpless horror as the car inches closer to the end of the pier.

The car tips, slides, and tumbles in. It happens so quickly that I can do nothing but gape. No screaming, no resistance. I realise she probably wasn't asleep. A strange, horrible feeling wraps itself around my chest and begins to squeeze. I imagine her sinking through the inky black, staring blankly as the icy water rushes in. The water bubbles, then subsides.

She is gone.

The pier looks exactly as it did before, save for the solitary figure walking back to the remaining car. He stops in its headlights and pulls a phone out of his pocket. He raises it.

"Sorry about that," a voice says. I jump. My thoughts scatter. The words don't come. I stare at the man. He is still, waiting for something. He cocks his head.

"Ma'am? Are you there?"

It's him.

The call box closes in on me. I force myself to speak.

"You're the ranger?" My voice sounds papery and hollow.

"Sure am. Now, you said you were lost?"

I shake my head silently as things begin to catch up.

"Don't panic, ma'am. The call box you're using has an ID that tells me your location." Metal crumples and glass cracks as the space shrinks smaller. He goes still as he looks at the number. A realisation, almost tangible, hangs in the air. His head turns. The sun has set, so all he must see is darkness, but he looks straight at me. He slowly raises the phone to his ear, and surely hears my panicked breath.

"Don't worry. I know where you are."

Judges Comment:

Written with a clear eye and steady pacing, the events captured in this story are made all the more suspenseful and chilling through the effective use of the first-person point of view, leaving readers and the narrator equally unsettled.

Novice Award

Fuel

BY KATY KNIGHTON

I saw Ben Mendlesohn the other day; he was driving a red hatchback and I noticed his old grey top as he turned a corner. I was sure it was him. We both had our driver windows down because it was summer, and it was a long moment, when I realised I'd seen Ben Mendlesohn.

Later I had to stop for petrol. It was night by then and still warm, bugs were flying around the lights as I filled up my car. When I went inside to pay, Ben Mendlesohn came in and waited behind me for a moment. He scratched his hair and fidgeted, and finally called over my shoulder to the attendant guy 'Hey mate! My car ran out of petrol, can I borrow a can?'

I didn't know if Ben Mendlesohn was a regular or if the attendant recognised him, but the guy produced a petrol container and funnel anyway. As Ben Mendlesohn took them he turned to me, saying, 'Hey, I could use your help, can you hold the funnel while I pour?'

I looked at him. He didn't seem to know that he was Ben Mendlesohn. But I knew. 'Of course, mate,' I said, 'Just let me lock up while you get some fuel.' I hovered around my driver door for a bit. I was going to help Ben Mendlesohn with his car. I didn't feel ready.

'Oii!' called Ben Mendlesohn, 'Let's go!'

We walked off together to his red hatchback, in the dark. His method of walking involved weaving on and off the road, checking to see if I was still there, and sort of talking to himself, or me, it was unclear.

But considering that we didn't really know each other I just assumed it was encouraging self-talk. He was saying things like 'We can get it done, mate, yes, we can.' And when I remember him saying this I can hear his gravelly voice.

His red hatchback was there under a tree, parked not quite straight.

'Well, look at that, mate. She's still there,' he said to the road, or to me, as he

unscrewed the container lid and the lid for the petrol inlet to the car. I got the funnel ready merely by stretching my arm toward the inlet hole. It seemed to be such a simple gesture that I almost wanted to ask him if I'd done it correctly.

As Ben Mendelsohn glugged the petrol in I fretted about walking in the dark to the petrol station.

'Do you want me to walk this stuff back?' I eventually asked, as he screwed both lids back on.

'How about I drive you, eh? I've gotta fill up the car, anyway,' said Ben Mendelsohn. I wanted to say 'Thanks, Ben,' but instead just said, 'Oh, ok,' like it was a regular deal. Just before I sat down in the passenger seat I swear he whisked some papers away and chucked them into the back. There was Ben Mendelsohn, he'd run out of petrol, I was helping him and he had just thrown some scripts onto the back seat of his car. I was getting a lift, from Ben Mendelsohn.

We arrived back and he started filling up his car the rest of the way. He nodded at me when he saw me looking at him, and said 'Hey, thanks a lot, mate. Not everyone wants to help in a crisis.'

'No worries, Ben Mendelsohn,' I said, and smiled.

He smiled back, and said 'You're alright, you know?' and kept holding the bowser, like a king.

Judges Comment:

This piece of flash, like its narrator, is unique, quirky and endearing. The protagonist's efforts to play it cool around a celebrity feel familiar, and the simple clarity of the ending fits the story and its characters.

First place

In the Womb of His Truck

BY KIT SCRIVEN

She has hidden the photograph. But I can still find him. My prompts include smoke drifting from a roll-your-own cigarette, or the sight of an old truck, preferably red, but any old truck usually summons him.

In the photograph my father is smoking. A roll-your-own buds from his lips. The smoke is silver and curls upwards, infiltrating the sky above him. Under him, a pyramid-shaped hill is under construction. He is simultaneously atop and in the hill. His gumboots are submerged to the ankles in scratchy, cloud-coloured salt. The smoker-thin sticks of him are silhouetted against the sky. My father is leaning forward and down, the sinews in his forearms exaggerated by the tone of photograph and memory. In his hands he holds a rake, a flat blade that he pulls upwards so that the salt is hilled under him. As he rakes, he rises.

When his hill is high enough, he descends. Behind him my father leaves sagging imprints and tiny avalanches. He climbs out of the photograph and strides to his truck, which is a cube-nosed Dinky toy, flat-trayed, red mostly, black-mudguarded, and garaged in a cleft inside my head, where she can't find it.

I follow him, scrambling into the cabin. After a couple of attempts I slam shut the passenger door. He endures my struggle. I tap a couple of the gauges, black-framed in the red-veined dashboard. We sit in his toy, on torn, sun-faded leather. The stitching in the bench seat is loose. I pull at a thread and my father shakes his head and laughs.

Sit. Inhale. Warm sun on old leather. Oil. Sweat. The cabin of my father's truck. The womb.

The socialisation of sons is a fraught task. Not much can soothe the boom-boom of the blood, the fist and flower, the furling and unfurling of sons.

In the womb of my father's truck, I pull at the loose threads in the seat of cracked leather. I extract the strings of my story. I shove my fists into the rents in the leather and fumble for more. Above the red-veined dashboard I see the sky indigo. Embedded in the

dashboard are black-rimmed gauges that score the infinity of him.

My socialisation begins and ends with knowing that if I turn and lift my head his mouth will make a grin and aim it at me. I register his wink, but can't wink back, even now, almost sixty years later. The water in my eye might spill.

Judges Comment:

The shifts between photograph and memory, adulthood and boyhood in this story are deftly handled, creating a sense of desolation and melancholy. The precision of the detail is remarkable, allowing readers to understand the situation through careful implication.

Second place

Girl in Short, Red-Cotton Pyjamas **BY SHEY MARQUE**

You don't say anything, standing in a bar listening to the band. There's a hand clamped on your right buttock. You swing around to punch a man in the chest. He's twice your size but it wipes the smirk from his face. His friend laughs, and so you punch him again. This is for you, girl in the short, red-cotton pyjamas.

Sometimes you think a friend's brother is like your brother. Someone who'll hold the heavy crystal vase above his head by the front door while the handle rattles late on a Summer evening, and you're hugging your knees on the sofa. Sometimes he is like that. Playing cricket in the backyard, he lofts the ball gently toward you so you learn confidence in being able to hit back and when you do, he's impressed.

Three of you stay awake for hours watching a marathon of horror on television and you don't scream, even with the lights off, and he's impressed. Later you awaken to something on your leg. It takes a minute to process the movement of fingers against skin.

You remember yesterday at the pool how he held his leg against yours to see whose tan was deepest, and he was impressed.

You don't move. He tries to turn you over. You don't move. You keep your chest pressed to the carpet as a hand forces its way under the front of your top. You worry it will tear. You don't move. You pretend you're asleep, make your body a dead weight. Your eyes are squeezed tight but he continues. You feign disturbance, moving your arms across your chest to block the fingers. He doesn't stop.

You worry he will feel your heart rate quicken. You will his mother to come home. You will his sister to waken, the friend sleeping right alongside you.

They will never know all the ways you scream, how your heart hurls itself into your oesophagus, how soundlessly your skin weeps, how cottonwool fills your alveoli, won't let the vowels out of your lungs, how your throat becomes a cul-de-sac.

You know he knows you're awake but you hide under your hair as your arms are

moved out of the way and he's kneeling on them. You can't breathe.

A key turns in the front door lock but he doesn't hear anything and flips you onto your back just as the light comes on. You breathe out. You think you're safe once the shouting begins until you realise she's shouting at you because you're all kinds of wrong. You with your long tanned legs and short, red-cotton pyjamas, you with the sleek dark hair that falls a certain way across your face but hides nothing. She says she might have known. Sometimes you think a friend's mother is like your mother. Someone who cheers you on as you cross the finish line on sports day, someone who warns you about boys. Sometimes she is like that.

At home you curl up in bed, you don't move, you don't say anything. You think by morning it will all be forgotten, and it is.

Judges Comment:

The writer's effective use of second-person point of view gives readers sharp insight into a sensitive and important issue. The protagonist's reactions to her traumatic experience are distinct and realistic, as, sadly, are those of other characters.

Third place

Some Things About Laundry

BY SARAH LEIGHTON

1. Laundry is a universal language. In the old days, we travelled around the world. My favourite photos were of laundry – softly swinging saris in muted rainbow colours of the seven chakras strung between lush green trees in Indian villages, or amongst the drab mud of small dwellings; white sheets, baggy underwear and the worn blue of a tradesman’s overalls hanging high up amongst potted herbs and flowers and songbirds in small cages along intricately tiled balconies in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Threadbare shorts and cotton summer shifts pegged with decaying wooden pegs, blowing on a fraying line strung between gumtrees in a dusty red paddock, red ochre dust ingrained in the thin fabric.

2. The laziest person in the house always does the laundry, and feels vindicated that they have done the housework. The laundry is the most satisfying job, and the easiest. Clean and sweet smelling. The dusting and the vacuuming are sweaty and dirty jobs, and cleaning pubic hair from the bathroom floor is no fun. The laziest person never does this job, although they seem to shed a lot.

3. At the beginning of a relationship, you will tell someone that you don’t care how they peg your clothes on the line. But a few years in, it’s a different story. If they peg your jeans by the waist unzipped, fade marks develop unevenly, leaving a dark crotch. It looks like you’ve wet yourself. T-shirts pegged under the arms fade in lines in the hot sun. In winter, pegging thick layers of multiple items means the thickness never dries, and the resultant dampness smells of mould. You may quietly change the pegs, or you may complain about this.

4. When the laziest person in the house leaves, you at first feel elated that you can do the laundry.

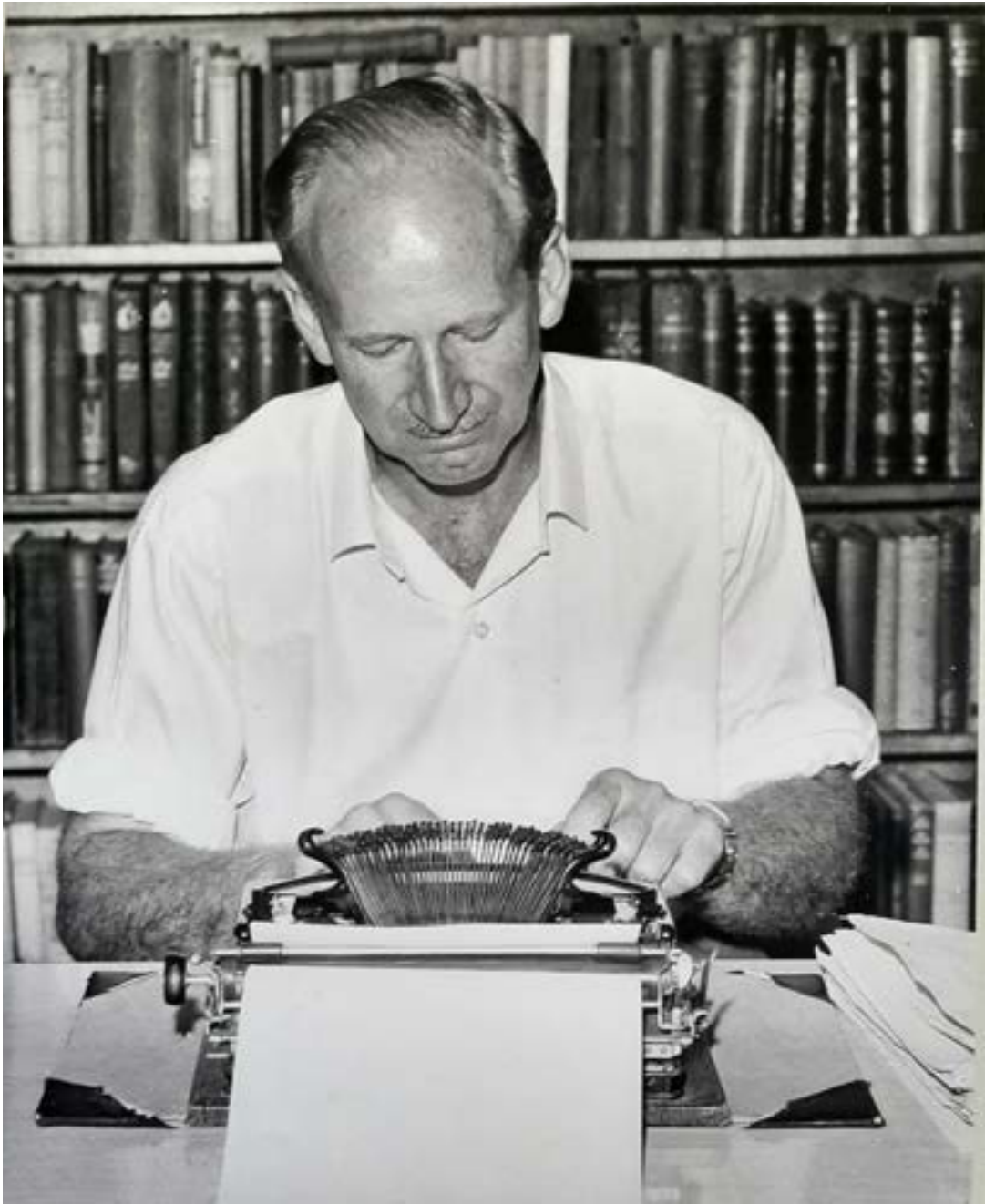
A few months in, you are washing half loads and you throw the wet washing over chairs and don't even take it out to the line. When you do go out there, you find a lonely pair of jeans, pegged at the waist and faded. They've been there since last summer.

You realise that the laziest person in the house also cooked and did the dishes and watered the pot plants.

You look out the window at your empty washing line, and see the pegs covered in cobwebs. You think about those holidays, about the person who held the bags and didn't complain every time you saw different coloured washing down a muddy lane or in a crowded street or a hot paddock, and you stopped to take another photo. You remember how they made sure you always had clean clothes in your suitcase for the next day. And you look again at the photos.

Judges Comment:

This rumination on 'things about laundry' appears deceptively commonplace at the start, but by the end readers come full circle to share a sense of sadness at the realisation at what has been taken for granted.



In Memory of
Peter Cowan



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