

I have to say, this was one of the hardest short fiction competitions to judge - many of the long list (34 stories) could well have ended up in the final 10. Most were engaging pieces, competently written, with strong characters, so I had a rather hard task in my initial elimination reads. A few came out early on for one reason or another - I felt a couple were probably pieces of something larger, for example - and in a couple, the prose was a little clunky in places, but they were still decent stories for all that. On the other hand, a few were shoo-ins into the 'possible final ten' pile.

For the final ten I was actively looking for something original, a story that felt as if the writer had to write it, one that didn't feel as if it had been told before. And for the top three places, on top of that requirement, I wanted stories that made me forget I was reading - a tough call.

Runners up:

Tracey Icton - As the world (re)turns

Lindsay Fisher - On blue-sky paper

Tamsin Hopkins - Hani's baby

Joanne Reardon - Mr H's angels

Jez Noond - The Bolani diplomat

Nicola Warwick - What happens in winter

Jacqueline Haskell - Pelt

All the seven runners-up are memorable. 'As the world (re)turns' is edge-of-seat stuff especially towards the end, and will take you to Northern Ireland in the time of The Troubles. 'On blue-sky paper' with its haunting fable-like quality, is set in a community in South America recovering from a natural disaster. 'Hani's baby', such a poignant piece, takes place in a balloon-ride high over Egypt, and 'Mr H's angels' plays out in 18th Century London. 'The Bolani Diplomat' takes you from Brighton to Afghanistan, 'What happens in winter' brings to life a snowy North American wilderness, and 'Pelt' takes place inside a London flat. All of these deliver work that is surprising, original.

THIRD: Adnan Mahmutovic - #YourCamp; survivor's guilt

What do I want from a story? To be taken out of myself, my life, and dropped into another world. I want to listen, I want to be made to think, and ideally, I want to have my wits sharpened. This story, which I am placing third, is a very successful second person narrative. It makes me immediately part of the action, and with not inconsiderable alchemy, gives me seemingly fresh memories for the duration of the text. Of course, it isn't alchemy - it is craft. A mix of voice, structure, character, event, and a compelling theme. The voice here is taut, urgent. The story deals, as the title suggests, with the aftermath of conflict - the echoes that will not leave even those who escape. The story was the shortest in the pile - slightly less than three pages. Just goes to show that quality is not always quantity.

SECOND: Zoe Gilbert - Mawkin

“Dew beater, Dew hopper
Layer with the lambs...”

so begins a very haunting, engaging and beautifully told story, starring young Maudie who has an almost mystical relationship with hares, which starts when her brother brings home three leverets in his pocket. This piece evokes a time in which existence was far tougher than it is now - I imagined it all unfolding alongside Jim Grace's 'Harvest' - in the next valley perhaps. I appreciated the prose here, carefully judged, lucid, the gentle unfolding of events at once intimate, poignant and almost mythical.

FIRST: Kerry Hood - Patria

The setting for this poignant, acutely observed story is a small northern community that happens to have an airfield nearby, and is the place where bodies of dead servicemen are brought back home from conflicts abroad - something like Royal Wootton Bassett. Today, the last body will be paraded through the town. Frank is a damaged man who has taken on the voluntary role of quasi master of ceremonies - and has done it so well that he has been invited to continue this role when the repatriations move 'down south'. To say more than that would be to spoil a far-ranging successful narrative which is not all darkness, but contains great flashes of humour and terrific character studies. The prose is excellent - the story very memorable. I found myself thinking about this one when I least expected it, and am delighted to award it first prize.