



**THE
JUDGES'
REPORTS
2024**

THE ADA CAMBRIDGE BIOGRAPHICAL PROSE PRIZE 2024

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THERE WERE 70 STORIES SUBMITTED FOR THE ADA CAMBRIDGE PRIZE FOR Biographical Prose this year, a fascinating range that was a joy to read. We enjoyed engaging with the variety of narratives that this broad genre allows: writing that reflects different times or places, or that taps into deeply personal emotion or reflections. This year's submissions included many that recalled the life-changing experiences of dealing with illness and death, and there were some moving and entertaining tributes to loved ones. There were narratives that brought historical events or individuals to life; others that focussed on travel, migration, or memories of childhood.

Inevitably, in judging prose of this range and quality, we found entries that we were reluctant to leave out. Our decision to shortlist eleven of our longlist reflects the quality of this year's submissions, and the interest and diversity of their narratives. We loved the winning story, which brings an individual's everyday stresses brilliantly to life. Among the shortlisted stories, some are based on formative childhood events, on trauma or on ageing; others reflect on social attitudes, culture and discrimination.

We were impressed by the wit and humour of the writing, and the honesty, as well as the use of some boldly experimental narrative devices. Several of our chosen stories are located within the context of recognisable historic events. We rewarded stories that created subtle layers of perception, including several with startling perspectives that allow for nuanced reflection. Some authors were able to combine various narrative elements, with impressive formal control. Each of the chosen stories has depth and originality; each rewards repeated reading. We congratulate our winner and all the shortlisted writers.

WINNER

Can You Hear Me? by **Catherine Padmore** Rushing to pick up a child from daycare in time to avoid a late fee, a harried parent contemplates the passengers on a crowded train. While the scenario is a routine one, it is deceptively simple. The writing builds tension through sharp observations that

convey all the discomfort of the crowded train to create a multi-layered interior monologue that is at once intensely personal and nuanced. The second-person singular ('you') narrative voice is effectively sustained throughout, the narrator engaging readers in her moment-by-moment experiences and the broader environmental and social concerns they give rise to. The writer's skill ensures that none of this commentary is preachy or over-explicit; much is understated. The overwhelming impression of this wonderful story is one of emotional range and complexity.

We chose two stories for the Runner Up, Highly Commended and Commended categories, finding each successful in very different ways.

RUNNERS UP

Not Even Specks by **Catherine Bateson** Dementia is hardly a laughing matter, yet 'Not Even Specks' manages to be simultaneously hilarious, painful and confronting. Never sentimental, this loving account of caring for a mother with dementia is conveyed with laconic, self-revealing honesty. The narrative is beautifully structured, shaped around several witty dialogues and reflections that shift easily into complicated family dynamics and their moving backstories.

St Patrick's Day by **Peter Kenneally** This poignant story explores the memories of a ten-year old English boy, following his mother's death in 1967. Tracing the breakdown of the narrator's small family, despite his father's attempts to keep them together, this memoir brings to the surface so much that remained unspoken. Painful and affecting, the writing spans years with great control, quietly showing the boy's increasing alienation, the continuing emotional fallout from his early loss, and the growth of self-knowledge.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Language and Fire by **Cynthia Troup** After returning to Australia from sabbatical leave in a small Italian town, a family receives the tragic news of the deaths of beloved Italian friends. Reflecting on her childhood experience of dislocation and loss, the adult narrator contrasts her past incomprehension with her father's overwhelming grief. Lyrical and experimental, interspersed with phrases from an Italian religious primer on friendship (*amicizia*), this story gradually pieces together fragments of memory and fiery metaphors, moving from past to present and back again.

Water Baby by **Poppea White** Set in New Zealand's Coromandel region and introduced as a tribute to Te Patukirikiri storytelling traditions, this is the most overtly poetic of the shortlisted entries. Unlike many stories of the death of a beloved parent, this one simultaneously laments the mother's loss and celebrates the life-affirming power of natural processes. Beginning with the

narrator's birth *en caul*, the story conjures elemental connections to place: magical descriptions of the river and the garden tended by her mother attain the mythic dimensions of folklore.

COMMENDED

There Isn't Time by **Hermina Burns** This is a thought-provoking story, from its opening account of the news of a suicide within the narrator's extended family, to its tender penultimate scene, in which the narrator helps her brother to prepare his own obituary. The writer uses the perspective of the narrator's Indigenous foster-sister to reflect on the lasting impacts of suicide and silence on families and within communities. 'There Isn't Time' is a clear-eyed and sensitive reflection on how we deal with death and its impacts, and a moving meditation on the reactions of those who remain.

Leg of Lamb by **Carmel Riordan** This is a powerful, oddly disturbing tale — a young girl helping her father tend to the family the night before her mother's return from a week-long absence. Her anxiety and growing awareness of the strains and secrets in the parents' marriage are dramatised through a narrative that combines believable dialogue with superbly evocative domestic detail and a final hint of the continuing complicity into which the child is being drawn.

SHORTLISTED

If You Don't, I Can't by **Catherine Bell** Highly entertaining, witty and sharply detailed, this tale of a young girl's view of her father, a country farmer, and his eccentric obsession with saving money, is also one of a child's need to fit in. Her excruciating embarrassment and desperation to impress her friends build beautifully to a final twist in an engrossing story that has the reader in stitches from beginning to end.

Sing Me Home by **Pauline Cleary** As the narrator visits her home town, where her mother has been stranded by flooding, she describes the impacts of the flood in vivid detail. The writer creates an understated but moving reflection on the narrator's relationship with her resilient mother, and her own sense of alienation from her childhood home. Among the most powerful elements of the story are the images of the desolation wrought by flood, which give rise to a subtle unfurling of self-discovery in the narrator herself and her ambivalent view of the home to which she returns.

Coffee With Martina by **Jean Flynn** This cleverly-managed and witty monologue proceeds at a cracking pace, providing one side of a conversation in response to the routine question, 'How are you?' The writing conveys the small stresses and concerns of a busy life, hinting at some darker challenges. Its brilliantly conversational style helps to create a voice for the speaker that is both relatable and authentic.

How To Be A Good Asian by **Nicky Zhang** This account of growing up within a migrant family makes fine distinctions about generational differences from the Chinese-Australian protagonist's "1.5" perspective. A series of anecdotes and snippets of dialogue reveal the insidious racism the narrator has experienced. With clarity and honesty, she challenges the expectations of others, and identifies how far such expectations have influenced her own sense of identity.