Mansfield Short Story Competition 2026

Judge's comments by Michelle Duff. In alphabetical order by writer's first name until highly commended, runner-up and winner.

'Dolls' by Amelia Nelson, Year 13, Kapiti College

What do we think about, when we think about dolls? That's what this story asks us, taking us on a journey through the narrator's experiences with dolls that veer from the innocent and fun to the creepy and absurd. By introducing us to her family—her sister and their "horde of beautiful blonde and brunette barbies," her friend, and her grandmother—the convincing first-person narrator (who is also very funny) builds a sense of intimacy with the reader, and a creeping sense of unease. "When Maddie and I would play Barbies I'd beg her to let me be Zara, the best doll of them all, with two-toned brown hair and a smooth body free from the moulded-on underwear that got in the way of our typical games, but she instead would give me Stacy, with moulded-on togs and limited arm flexibility, or naked Ken" and "When you laid them down, their eyes rolled forward, giving the impression they were sleeping". The story is shot through with the heart-tugging loss of childhood, and something even more unsettling beneath—the dolls with their too-large heads, their arms falling from sockets, speak to a disintegrating of the kind of safety that home should represent. The writing is beautifully understated, and the reader is fully rewarded at the end. Excellent.

'The Doris Plum' by Devon Farrelly, Year 13, Samuel Marsden Collegiate School

This is a story of uncertainty, and choice, and how to figure out who you are in the world, told through the lens of a teenage girl on a train ride from the Hutt. In it, she's contemplating her future while grasping a stolen plum, its juices running through her fingers. The plum in this story mirrors the internal state of our protagonist, and we don't know if she will crush it, ruining her uniform, or eat it, or throw it away. A conversation with a stranger is at turns illuminating, heartrending, and funny; when the older woman wonders if a grey child's blanket she is knitting is too boring, our protagonist Raya suggests she livens it up a bit. "'Hot pink,' the woman mused, her needles pausing. 'Yes. A scandal in the cradle. I like how you think, love.'" The story uses beautiful imagery with hardly a word out of place, well-constructed sentences, and I felt like I really got to know Raya, like I was in her head—I felt for her, in her state of flux and movement (perfectly typified by the train) and wanted what she did. Some of the lines took my breath away, like this final one: "Instead of opening her books, she leaned her head against the cool glass of the window, watching the rain catch the passing streetlights, turning the dark Wellington night into a blur of brilliant, unwritten streaks of gold."

‘We’d Still Talk’ by Esmé Hollings, Year 13, Wellington High School

The confidence of the narration in this story, and the strong voice throughout, made me come back to it again and again. The first line made me laugh out loud: “Terrance is a dick. I’ve known this since I was seven, when he told me my sister was crying like a little girl.” Terrance is the main character’s cousin, and he is annoying, but he’s family, and as the story builds, we learn, little by little, that—like for so many people—there’s more going on for Terrance in his life than it seems on the surface. It is really hard to write dialogue, but here it’s brilliant; another character overhears their Grandma gossiping; “I heard her say that Terrance’s brother is a psychopath. Do you even know what that means? It means that he has no feelings. At all.” A death in the family is a moment for change, and we find out how strong bonds forged in childhood really can be. An insightful, cleverly written story that makes me feel excited for what this writer does next.

‘I Am Honey’ by Georgia King-Brown, Year 12, Solway College

Do not read this story if you are feeling vulnerable, or you will want to cry, because it truly brings all the feels; from the warm fuzzies of true, unconditional love to the bittersweet sadness of knowing it's going to end. It’s written from the perspective of an adorable, loyal family labrador narrating her own life—the most important thing in it is her older human sister, Georgia—and as we all know, doggy years don’t last as long as people ones. The tension inherent in this knowledge, and how we all fall in love with Honey, keeps us hooked on the tale. Being in Honey’s head is hilarious; “We had stopped to talk to Mark Guscott, the neighbouring farmer, on his quad bike, which was a furry mess of wagging, barking dogs. Georgia’s dad wanted to introduce me to Mark, to make sure he wouldn’t shoot me if I wandered into the lambing paddock.” And it’s also heartrending, because of what the reader knows, and Honey doesn’t; “Things have slowed down a bit for me lately…Georgia seems to have given up on finding treasure…but I really don’t mind because I like to spend more and more of my time sleeping.” An original, engrossing story from a confident narrator.

‘Preserving Time’ by Meredith Williams, Year 12, Queen Margaret College

From the first line, this story had me hooked. “Last summer, the plums turned into jam on the side of the road.” As an opening image it’s striking, bittersweet, and makes me want to know why—who isn’t picking those plums up? What kind of town is this? “In the sizzling heat, they had begun to cook, the cloyingly sweet aroma drifting between tanned legs and dry grass and mingling in the air with wafts of sunscreen and BO.” This story builds beautifully from here on in, with scenes I could see, taste, and feel; from the clink of champagne bottles to the ringing of church bells. This immersive story follows a woman coming to support a dear friend in grief; she walks the streets of a city alive with love and laughter, a striking juxtaposition with her own reason for visiting. We spend time with her in her quiet work in the vestry of a church, minutes that could be hours, a purposeful slowing-down that has the effect of showing us how quickly life can pass us by. Memorable, vivid writing. Well done.

‘Seven Minutes of Sunlight’ by Mishall Umar, Year 13, Hutt Valley High School

A girl in Kabul runs a guerilla radio station, banned under the Taliban, in this short story that’s told in the first person. A rebel girl in a country where women and girls are oppressed is a viewpoint I want to hear, and this story does not disappoint. I’m with our protagonist as she agonises about whether to start broadcasting, knowing how dangerous it is; and my heart is in my mouth as she speaks to her listeners, giving them strength, urging them together in solidarity for the seven minutes she can get on air. “I hear a truck rumble in the distance, its headlights flashing through the street and casting its predatory silhouette onto my ceiling. I realise I don’t have much time, and the butterflies in my stomach soar to my throat. I feel my heart banging against my ribcage, fighting for freedom. I lean closer to the mesh microphone and force the butterflies out.” The reward for her bravery is solidarity, and a chink of hope. This story opens a window for a reader, making us think of what life must be like in Afghanistan for women and girls right now, and best of all, making us care. I also loved that parts of this were in Persian. A very successful story.

‘Proof That I’d Touched Something Real’ by Pearl Winkworth, Year 13, St Mary’s College

The nature of memory, childhood, and nostalgia—how we remember things, and what we forget—are centre stage in this story which reminds us that domestic spaces are not always safe ones. Instead, the familiar is made uncomfortable in this story, and we feel it from the start; summer has “bloated” the bitumen, the tar is blisters, the footpath is stubborn. From the get-go I’m intrigued; we follow our narrator through a childhood dystopia, where happy touchstones are inverted, where even a walk to the dairy is fraught. “Whenever someone walked in, it rang with the confidence of a church bell. Adults never seemed to hear it. Children always did. That's the difference—children still believe the world is talking to them.” There is violence here, unspoken but present; siblings hide shoulder-to-shoulder beneath beds, fear is felt in footstep and whisper, and even collecting shells is impossible. “Bringing pieces of the sea home was like trying to pocket sunlight.” It felt like there was so much going on underneath the surface, an entire story untold, that our main protagonist couldn’t or wouldn’t let go of. Intriguing, dark, brilliant, necessary.

‘My Mural’ by Sarah I-Xin Tan, Year 12, Newlands College

A loving family, but one where tensions exist; a hōha brother, a mum who’s got your number, and questions about what you’re going to do when you grow up. The characters in this story are annoying, loving and believable—I want to punch Hemi hard on the arm and roll my eyes at Mum when she’s not looking, too. We follow the protagonist, who yearns to be an artist in a world where she’s told it’s impossible, and where work that brings in hard-earned cash is valued—but her heart keeps pushing her until she finds a space where it might be. Not expressing herself is painful; “Blood oozes out of my wounds, through the brush and onto the paper, pulsing in a whirl of colour. When I finally stop, two iridescent eyes stare out of the page.”

Later, there is yearning when she looks at her self-portrait, at the way she's drawn herself—which is different to the way sees herself in the mirror, a more internal truth— "the colours swallow me whole." When she finally does get the chance to show the world who she is—by that one person who can make all the difference—it's a vibrant expression of self, expressed in rich imagery. "The wind flutters over my cheeks. It spreads through my soul, right down to my fingertips until everything is light as a feather." I want to know what happens next—always an excellent sign. Great work. I hope Shea keeps painting.

Highly Commended: 'Headlights' by Amy Cordwell, Year 13, Tawa College

A boy goes hunting and is trapped like a deer in the headlights. This is clever, scary, fast-paced, heart-thumping stuff. The pacing is great; I loved the variation between sentences, with the short, punchy lines giving the narrator a believable, unique voice. I didn't like the main character, Tyler, and this is a compliment, because it's harder to write complicated, slightly unlikable characters than it is to write nice ones (and also more fun to read). I kind of wanted him to get got, while also desperately wanting him to get the hell out of that ngahere. The sense of atmosphere is built with the use of vivid imagery; "The road stretches out endlessly before the mud-spattered ute, a gaping wound carved through the forest…the speedometer ticks up to 100, then to 110. Nothing else is going to be on a road this remote, this late, anyway. Best just to get home." When Tyler finds himself alone in the bush, "the emptiness is a held breath," the trees reach out "gleefully," the road "unspools." and we can feel ourselves in there with him, viscerally; "Tyler clenches his fists until he can remember the feeling of the deer's warm blood slicking his knuckles." This is a beautifully written horror story with an unexpected ending that delivers the final punch. Nice work.

Highly Commended: 'When Words Disappear' by Marama Hambly, Year 13, Samuel Marsden Collegiate School

This story is an artfully written piece of speculative fiction which holds the reader in its grasp from the beginning. I was laughing from the opening line, even as things in the story got bleaker and more frightening, because it was written with such a surety and deftness of touch. An original and terrifying concept—that people would forget words and their meanings—is taken to its horrifying conclusion, forcing the people in this story world find to out if feelings are enough, and the reader is left with a lingering sense that maybe we should be paying closer attention in our daily lives to the slippery nature of words, to the way information is spun, and to what we stand to lose when things we take for granted are removed. "The government called it a temporary linguistic irregularity. The newspapers called it a phenomenon. My little brother called it "the word thing." Nobody called it frightening. Not yet." It's got shades of Orwell, shades of Vonnegut, and it was a whole lot of fun to read which is one of the most important things. It's also, I'll say it again, very funny. "That afternoon, Wellington forgot the word harbour. It happened at 3:17. You could watch it happen. People stopped at the waterfront and stared. A man pointed towards the water. "What's that?" Nobody answered." Also: short sentences. Very impactful. Loved it.

Runner-Up: ‘Settling Down’ by Kaitoro Walker, Year 13, Hutt Valley High School

A searing indictment on the colonisation of a body and mind; what happens when the person who says they love you and will take care of you takes up residence instead, tries to bend you to their will, to assimilate you? This story works on two levels; on the surface it’s a story about a relationship that slowly descends into domestic violence, the kind of twisted ‘love’ that begins like a fairytale. “You tell me stories of where you’ve been. The oceans you crossed, the places you were welcomed into, the sunsets you’ve seen. You promise me all of them.” It’s also, as the title suggests, a parable about colonial violence. “Sometimes I tell you stories I heard when I was growing up. Stories about giant octopuses, and fished-up lands, and ocean gods, and men riding on whales and sea monsters breaking open harbours. You always listen politely, never interested. You tell me to focus on the present. I stop telling those stories after a while, and start telling ones you like.” Using the framework of an abusive relationship to make this point is astute and heartbreaking, hammered home with a repeated refrain throughout. “The next morning, when I wake up, I smell coffee. Your usual sign of goodbye. I ask when you’re going to leave. You smile at me. “I think I’ll stay a while. You don’t mind, do you?”

Winner: ‘Mercy’ by Juliet Grotrian, Year 12, Queen Margaret College

This story is a quietly powerful rumination on resistance to change, and the lasting consequences of the decisions we make as humans. Our main protagonist is older, living alone in a small beach town, where they walk past the same maimed seagull every day. “The thing’s gone and broken itself. That wing isn’t supposed to be tented at that sort of angle, and I’ve seen enough of the darned animals to know.” And, on another day: “The gull pulls its head out of its feathers and cocks its head at the sardines. Then the damn thing goes and tucks itself right back up. What an ungrateful rat.” The voice in this story is original and convincing; I feel like I know this main character—a lonely, likeable curmudgeon, they want to leave the gull to the “greenies” until they finally decide to help, by which time it’s heartbreakingly too late. In any good short story, a change or the possibility for change is opened up, and we can see this in the character’s realisation in the final, brutal line, which will stay seared in my memory for a long time to come: “The surf is wild and frothy today. Mountains and valleys of blue shift on the surface, like a landscape torn down and remoulded again and again. Above the peaks, small black shapes are drifting. Seagulls. Seagulls with perfect, perfect wings.” A striking metaphor for failing to act on environmental harm, and an entertaining read.