



The entries that stood out most for me each found a unique point of difference from the general mass of submissions. The vast majority of the flash fictions submitted to the competition were adopting the mainstream mode of literary or dramatic fiction, and a fair proportion were about those well-worn topics that we writers of stories often instinctively reach for: break-ups, infidelity, bereavement, aging, and so on. In a competition, submitting a story exploring one of these familiar subjects via a conventional literary mode can be a risk: the fundamental reality of fierce competition means that the story is going to have to do something extremely special to lift itself away from the general mass of papers the judge is poring through.

Among the entries, I found myself enjoying flashes that used precise, skilful language; or ones that playfully used folk tale or fantasy motifs; or ones that judiciously toyed with strategies normally associated with prose poetry; or ones that had particularly resonant endings (through, paradoxically, not saying too much). I also valued distilled concision and rhythmic sentence construction. In the end, I tended to pick out stories that I felt were doing these kinds of things well, alongside the bread and butter stuff of well-sketched characters and interesting story situations, or a confident movement between action, description, dialogue and internal reflection.

For the top two places, in the end, I settled upon two genre pieces - a highly entertaining and lively science fiction story that doubled as environmental/political fiction - through the use of two aliens as characters, the story asked resonant questions about humanity; and a subtle piece of historical writing, about two women and an artist in a tavern, which made interesting use of narrative time and whose ending resonated with the unsaid. Both were stories that caught the eye at first glance, partly because of the less conventional genre chosen, but also - crucially - both rewarded repeat readings, as I uncovered subtle details that seemed in service to the whole, details that left me thinking even more about the ideas in each story.

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