A Message from the Judge, Lauren Elise Daniels

Thank you for asking me to judge the ***Women Writers Queensland's 2025 Marj Wilke Short Story Competition***. Please know that I'm so sorry I can't be there in person to deliver the results. I appreciate your understanding, and the person who's reading these impressions.

This year presented one of the strongest collections of voices I've read to date! The Society received **123 beautiful stories**, and I hope every writer who entered is deeply encouraged.

A round of applause please for all who entered and for creating such an inspiring and supportive Society of Women Writers.

For an overview, a strong sense-of-place inhabited these stories—spanning urban to regional, historical to contemporary. Thematically, writers crafted the contours of motherhood, aging, illness, survival, isolation, gender, infidelity, friendship, first crushes that led to solid marriages, and even The Emu War of 1932—*phew!* Narrative devices spanned cinematic Australian imagery, streams of consciousness, 1st and 3rd person points-of-view, and styles ranging from poetic and lyrical to economical and humourous.

These stories intersected in our shared humanity. They were touched by women's wisdom and true grit. They delved into the intimate experience of coercion, domestic violence, financial sovereignty, women's risk for homelessness, and our identities within powerful family dynamics. The portrayals of family bonds were crafted with authenticity, pain, wit, sweetness, and grace. It was also quietly amusing to see how many were devoted to knocking off a useless husband—*really, ladies—you're not to be trifled with!*

Genres spanned realism, magic realism, science fiction, and fantasy alongside Australian Gothic, psychological and philosophical reflections, and overseas travel as an Australian rite of passage. Historical fiction and First Nations' wisdom of Australia and New Zealand contoured spiritual, geographical and familial landscapes.

For my judging process, I impose a literary ranking through six technical elements to determine a long list, then short list, then allocate the winning circle. These are:

- **Structure:** Does an opening hook hint at core conflicts and theme. Does a cohesive plotline towards a climatic revelation and resolution? Is there a twist?
- **Scene:** Does dramatic action deliver through sensory imagery and precise, focused detail? Are events *shown more than told* to readers?
- **Characterisation:** Do authentic characters navigate challenges and experience a shift in perspective?
- **Style:** Are there turns-of-phrase that do not rely on cliché, but rather, embody the author's voice through organic, consistent prose?
- **Emotional textures:** How are feelings conjured? Are complex emotions conveyed through imagery and dramatic action?
- **Message:** Does a central meaning thread the story from start to finish? Is there depth, resonance, transformation, and touches of universal truth?

Using a point ranking system, a <u>Long List of 30</u> from 123 entrants was established.
Delirium – Maureene Fries, Qld
Elation with a Dose of Agony – Lara McCormack (Qld)
L'ecole Mysterieuse - Virginia Miranda (Qld)
Petals – Tegan Fairley (Vic)
Return in Time – Deborah Glover (Qld)
The Long Way Home – Donna Goodacre (Qld)
The Painting – Deborah Glover (Qld)
The Spanish Dancer – Di Hill (Qld)
The Truth is Dust – Jo Skinner (Qld)
Their Father – Toni Risson (Qld)
Time Pays No Heed – Barbara Gurney (WA)
Wolf – Sarah Goodison (NSW)
1994, Mandy – Jen Francis (Qld)
A Soupmaker's Solution – Bernadette McCabe (Qld)
Babushka Doll – Emily Theo (NSW)
Bravo, Julia Moreau – Helen Walker (Qld)
Bromeliad – Daniela Giorgi (Qld)
Brothers of the Road – Narelle Ryan (Qld)
Control Z, 2074 – Sharon Wong (Vic)
Fighting the Fearless -Susan Booker (Qld)
Hand-Made Knits – Libby Sommer (NSW)
Napoleon's Waterloo – Fiona Harvie (Qld)
Neatly Done – Fiona Harvie (Qld)
One Meal at a Time – Debra Pugh (Qld)
Red String, Black Mirror – Sharon Wong (Vic)
The Garlic Truce – Sharon Wong (Vic)
The Plan – Fiona Flanders (Qld)
Unexploded Ordnance – Rosemary New (Qld)
Waiting for Ruby – Donna Lee (Qld)
Watchkeeper – Nadia van der Merwe (Qld)

And a <u>Short List of 15</u> from the 30 long listees…
Delirium – Maureen Fries (Qld)
Petals – Teagan Fairley (Vic)
The Long Way Home – Donna Goodacre (Qld)
The Truth is Dust – Jo skinner (Qld)
1994, Mandy – Jen Francis (Qld)
Bravo, Julia Moreau – Helen Walker (Qld)
Brothers of the Road – Narelle Ryan (Qld)
Control Z, 2074 – Sharon Wong (Vic)
Fighting the Fearless – Susan Booker (Qld)
Napoleon's Waterloo -Fiona Harvie (Qld)
Neatly Done – Fiona Harvie (Qld)
Red String, Black Mirror – Sharon Wong (Vic)
Unexploded Ordinance – Rosemary New (Qld)
Waiting for Ruby – Donna Lee (Qld)
Watchkeeper – Nadia van der Merwe (Qld)

The Winners

1st Prize: **“Neatly Done” by Fiona Harvie**
2nd Prize: “**Red String, Black Mirror” by Sharon Wong**
Lauren Elise Daniels Encouragement Award: **“1994, Mandy” by Jen Francis**

3 Highly Commended

“Control Z, 2074” by Sharon Wong -*science fiction as an existential metaphor for how we cope with mistakes, regret, and the challenge to ‘live forward’ instead of backwards.*
“Petals” by Tegan Fairley - *a streamlined structure and lyrical composition. A unique portrayal of the emotional truths and patterns of coercive control.*
“The Truth is Dust” by Jo Skinner - *a psychological exploration and quiet revelations that surround a haunted place, a haunted heart, leaning toward its own redemption.*

3 Honourable Mentions for Strong Themes & Social Messaging

“The Long Way Home” by Donna Goodacre
“Brothers of the Road” by Narelle Ryan
“Fighting the Fearless” by Susan Booker

A Word About the Winners

1st Prize: “Neatly Done” is precisely that. I read this story, murmuring to myself and chuckling, with my hand over my mouth at my desk. It has everything, including a flawless opener. Check this out:

> Eleanor Vance didn't just appreciate order; she *was* order. Her mornings began with a specific sequence: iron the newspaper, align the salt and pepper shakers on the immaculate kitchen counter, plump every cushion on the sofa to an exact angle, and then, only then, would she permit herself a single, perfect cup of Earl Grey tea.
>
> Her home was a sanctuary of symmetry and sparkle, a testament to her unwavering dedication to tidiness. Not a speck of dust dared to alight on her polished surfaces, nor a single blade of grass stray beyond the manicured borders of her prize-winning rose garden.
>
> Arthur, her husband of thirty-seven years, had largely understood this unspoken covenant. He’d been a tidy man himself, in his own way, during his years as an accountant – his spreadsheets precise, his files colour-coded. But then, the unthinkable happened: Arthur retired.

A promise is made to the reader in those opening paragraphs, telegraphing what this story is about and it delivers to the readers. We see the perfect set-up here: a solid point of view; a clear domestic setting; economical and authentic characterisation; and the sharp tri-tipped point of internal, external, and interpersonal conflicts poised like an arrow ready to fly.

The pacing through the piece is consistent and seamless—one beat after another, pushing toward the demarcation line, until the sudden, piercing surprise—a flawless twist.

I laughed out loud and shouted at the ceiling in my study. And if a story can do that? *It’s a winner.*

2nd Prize: “**Red String, Black Mirror”** packs quite the surprising punch in this collection of stories. Opening with a grandmother’s protection and carried by its swift pacing, the taut narrative stems from a warning and becomes a wrestling match between obedience and disobedience, the old ways and the new.

> When Anya first tied the red string around her wrist, her grandmother's voice rang in her ears: *"Never look too long into the mirror after midnight. Mirrors are not just glass — they are doors. The string keeps you bound to this world. Without it, the other side will call you."*
>
> At twelve years old, she had rolled her eyes. At fifteen, she hid her wrist in her school jumper, embarrassed when friends asked why she wore "a piece of yarn like a toddler." By twenty-five, she laughed about it, calling it another one of Popo's old-country ghost tales.

Read this tale in your chair at night, if you dare. Listen to your grandmothers, and tread lightly on *this* side of the mirror!

3rd Prize: "1994, Mandy" a taut, intimate immersion into the strength required to escape domestic violence and how deeply the experience penetrates the speaker's thoughts and beliefs about herself.

> I pull into the driveway and the lights are on. I am not expected. I have promised myself I won't be emotional (*weak*) and I have practised what I will say (*liar*) but when the door opens and I see Mum's happy surprise the tears come anyway. I ask if I can stay and now I have to tell (*some of*) the truth about what has been going on behind closed doors. It's ugly, and (*my fault*) shameful, and bitter on my tongue, but they hug me and say *of course* and *we knew something wasn't right* and *you're safe now*.

"1994, Mandy" is an authentic, potent journey from its opening lines all the way into its determined, gentle close. The story demonstrates how, according to Albert Camus, fiction can be "the lie that tells the truth". Good short fiction is staked in informed experience and spotlights our most intimate experiences without shame. This story highlights how so many women are speaking up about formerly taboo subjects and how breaking down silences liberates us all.

Thank you all and congratulations to the winners, and to all who threw their hats in the ring. It was an honour and a pleasure to read your work!