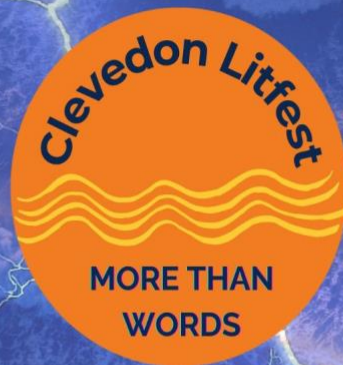


**Clevedon LitFest**

# *Flash*

**Fiction Award 2025**

**Winning entries**



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## Flash Fiction Award 2025 – First Prize

### Destination by Cathy Eberle

Anna's ancestors left her a ticket.

She decides to fly now, pay later.

Lonely nights are spent hugging the toilet bowl, spewing out loss and longing. The side effects of translocation skulk beneath her silky-snug blanket of fortune, in a suitcase bulging with goodbyes.

Fleeting relapses bring stinging release, images snatching her into exact moments, nostrils attentive to fleeting scents of home breathed in a scarf, the tart taste of absence on her tongue. Licking her lips, she savours its trace.

She polishes her ornaments with memory, but her contrary genie has taken a leave of absence. She can see her face in the gleaming surfaces but is not entirely sure who it is she sees. Whipped into numbness by coastal winds, she breathes on fingers purple with loss, stiff and clumsy, unable to hold her dreams.

Shedding salt slows slightly, for her well is as dusty as the Namib, and her hard, flat tones roll into a rehearsed rhythm. Her tongue thunders over local names, words crunching like dry savanna grass beneath her feet. Stormy, she exudes heat, feels cold, is persistent as the bright desert flowers.

Tightly curled bud in her gut, her claim stakes itself in pain. Feverishly she pans water, swirling it for hints of gold, hope folded neatly in her chest. Her sun sets on belief and promise. Darkness partners despair. Spring is not in her step, although it screams in green, erupting like acne. Birds mock her in tittering tribes yet still the ill winds wind her tightly in their chilled arms, holding her close, folding her in a mourning sheet.

The street sweeps its slate clean with swathes of grey dampness. Upright and white, the calendar politely counts belonging, keeping her cauldron half-full, spirit rising with the steam from her aromatic coffee, bereft of images in her non-existent tea leaves.

Cleaving apart longing and purpose she chops doggedly away at her frosted windscreen. Unseen she moves like water through sodden grass which closes in soggy clumps where her feet pass. She struggles to find any trace of herself other than a fleeting glimpse of a face in a bus window. Only the clock moves a rigid hand in greeting.

Midnight strikes. The portals open and she passes begin. Accepted, adopted, allowed in, she feels belonging blossoming in her womb. Clutching a ticket to Ever After, treasure collected, she's through the gates, the citadel awaits her. Half-turning as she heads inward sensing the prize, a final inhalation of musky animal, tickles her nose, deep throaty grunts rumbling in soundwaves against her inner ear beneath the roll of scattered bones. Campfires and stars burn against her lids, lulling her to sleep without dreams. Her heartbeat's a green blip against the dark screen.

Slinky in black velvet, the moon, two-faced, Northern Lights twisted in her pale hair, grins smugly, casting her spotlight on a slipper, sparkling, on the ascending stairs leading to her throne. From the shadows, a hand reaches out, picking it up.

## Flash Fiction Award 2025 – Second Prize

### Secrets My Doll Will Never Tell You by Rosie Mowatt

I lose my doll at the lake, certain she's drowned. In dreams, her yellow wool hair and sewn-on smile appear to drift just beneath the surface, her arms outstretched, looking up. At Christmas, she's under the tree, a scarlet ribbon around her neck. No label. Same, but different. Still damp around the edges.

Grass swishes against my calves, cows sway like ships around me. One looks up, patiently chewing cud, then begins to follow me. Another joins. Then another. Suddenly I'm running across the field. The herd thunders behind, hooves tearing up the quiet. I see a dot of yellow on the gate ahead. I pick up pace, I can't reach it.

Later, in a snowstorm, my mother steps into a hollow rabbit hole, disappears downward with a yelp. Badger, the dachshund dog is gone too, just a trail of pawprints in the yellow snow. We shout, laugh nervously, wait for them to rise out of the drift like it's a game.

The sky is all grimacing teeth that day.

A birthday party. I'm playing rounders, slip on wet grass. My wrist snaps like dry wood. 'Get up. It's just a scratch,' my doll whispers in my ear. I swallow my tears, use my good arm to steer my bike home.

Older now, I'm skiing and the mountain pitches too fast. I can't turn, have to keep descending. Out of control. The edge of the cliff comes into view like a full stop. My doll beckons, yellow hair covered by woollen ear muffs. The fall is long, soft and slow.

The boat flips fast. One moment horizon, the next, the taste of salt in my mouth and no lifebelts. We float in the churn. The waves don't care who we are. It's the first time I see a grown-up cry. I open my clenched fist, stare as a strand of yellow wool floats away.

No-one notices the way the world tilts.

Somewhere, I know my doll is still smiling, waiting for me. Keeping my secrets safe at the bottom of the lake.

## Flash Fiction Award 2025 – Third Prize

### Defining Serena by Chris Swingler

After carefully tucking her long hair under her hat, Serena fills her backpack with leaflets and sets off.

The Chosen Ones will be patrolling the streets and skies looking for rule-breakers, so she plans to keep off the main roads, but stay near buildings, in the shadows. She knows the risks but is determined to get her message out there, so the people know they are not alone.

It's not long before a movement catches Serena's eye, she backs into a doorway as a people monitoring drone circles above.

The Government, made up of the Chosen Ones, has ordered the people to line the streets tomorrow to celebrate their latest diktat, and humiliate those who've dared to rebel. Just as these thoughts pass through her mind a group of Chosen Ones, waving beam guns and traps, rush towards her.

'You've broken a New World order,' says a Chosen One. 'Rule no 5, YOU SHALT NOT DEFINE YOURSELF.' Its pale veined hands, like talons, tug at her hat – revealing her crime. The New World order forbids hair. Serena's long dark hair drops from its hiding place, swinging like a hangman's rope. Slapping her face filling her mouth. Her voice silenced as her bag falls to the ground spilling its contents. A space hub lands nearby, scattering the banned leaflets.

The following day, the people line the streets as ordered. Serena drags her naked body draped in heavy chains along the dusty road. Some people throw mud, a few brave ones fling wild flowers picked from hedgerows.

Her head is publicly shaved. Her nakedness exposes dark patches covering her young body, like bruised plums. Armed space hubs and drones hover searching for signs of dissent. The Chosen Ones watch from a high platform, like Roman Emperors deciding the fate of those who dare to break the rules.

Serena is forced to stop before the platform. The leader stands, his pale skin pulled tight over his bald head. It's then she notices its long white cloak showing a faint yellow line edging its collar.

The leader points a finger at her. 'You've broken rule no 5, Thou shalt not define yourself, and broken rule 3, the distribution of banned material.' Serena's fate is sealed, she lifts her head.

'So have you,' she cries. 'The yellow on your collar defines you as a leader.' She hears a loud muttering in the crowd, a hand strikes her.

Her chains clatter like hollow church bells as she's dragged away. Her head drops, a few stray strands of her shaven hair fall unnoticed to the ground. It's then she sees one of her leaflets curled in the gutter. She watches a young girl pick it up and read the words emblazoned across the top – YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO DEFINE YOURSELF.

The young girl nods to her, before secretly passing it to an older boy. Serena smiles.

## Flash Fiction Award 2025 – Honourable Mention

### Getting Away From It All by Cath Humphris

‘Do something different,’ the counsellor advised. So they’re walking down a wooded valley after four miles of moorland. Sally’s legs ache, but she’ll endure it. Greg’s not said much about the cottage being nothing like the website, or the poor Wi-Fi.

When they reach the gurgling river Sally drops onto the oddly bouncy turf beside it. Her new kit is waterproof, after all.

The flask of coffee is still hot, but doesn’t suit their surroundings. Sally scoops a cup of water, and Greg says, ‘That only looks clean.’

She gestures behind them. ‘It’s naturally filtered. All those layers of turf and stone.’

He says, ‘It’s full of microbes. And liver fluke and leptospirosis from the sheep, deer and rats.’ That’s the most he’s said all morning. Sally doesn’t admit she’s caught a tadpole, just tips it back, while he adds, ‘What d’you think keeps the grass short?’

She doesn’t point out the chimney below, where generations of farmers must have drunk from it, so perhaps this verdant valley is working: better than yoga. Pleased, she repeats that last part to Greg, adding, ‘I’m glad we came.’

He looks up from the map and says, ‘Good.’ Then points to the trees. ‘There’s a shorter path if we leave the river.’

Sally pushes her fingers through the cropped turf. ‘I suppose this is a glade.’ She takes a deep breath, just as a cuckoo gives its triple call. ‘Imagine being here on a hot day, paddling. It won’t be deep enough for anything else by then, but imagine how delicious, how...’

Greg says, ‘Does everything have to be a fantasy?’ He folds the map, and Sally knows they never will come here again.

She watches her shadow ripple on the sparkling water, then lies flat out to look through it. In the depths shoals of tadpoles rush around, but not away. They could see the long,

long way up past rippling weeds to her, but they're resisting the fast, leaf-stained current, and have no other choice than to swim in great herds across the clearings.

She hears Greg fastening and hoisting the daysack. Then his shadow is beside hers, and she says, 'You go ahead. I'm staying a little longer.' To her surprise he doesn't reply, just leaves.

Each year too many tadpoles hatch for all to thrive. Some abandon their vegetarian diet and become cannibals. Once their legs have grown, and their tails dropped off, the survivors will crawl out to seek solitary safety in the cool woodland where Greg is.

Sally thinks how tadpoles must mirror the experiences of the tetrapods hoisting themselves onto land, millions of years ago. Their little arms, that were used to pushing water, suddenly required to strain against gravity.

She feels the pressure of her own weight sandwiching her lungs against the unyielding solid cliff edge, and recognising that mermaids are an ancestral memory rolls over, unlaces her boots, then slips forward.

Sleek as an otter she enters the cool, welcoming water.