

When reading for prizes—as with any other reading—I don’t tend to arrive with any set criteria in mind as to what makes a good story. (What I love, in fact, is having my expectations of what makes a good story completely overturned.) I read in the way I hope for my own writing to be read: meeting each story on its own ground, adjusting my mental gait to suit the terrain, and waiting to see where it means to take me.

Perhaps the only element that’s indispensable is a distinct and compelling voice—whether that’s the character’s voice, or the author’s, or some mysterious hybrid of the two. It needn’t be a reliable, or even a likeable voice—I just want to be able hear it clearly enough to stay with it, to follow it along its own desire lines and around blind corners, in and out of the woods. In some stories, such a voice makes itself known more quietly, in the going, and is no less potent or memorable for that.

In each of the winning stories I recognised such a voice. Each has different ways of drawing a reader in close, and impelling her to listen up. **Down the Rabbit Hole** suffuses an ordinary, mundane experience with an urgency and unanticipated tenderness made all the more relatable via the hammering pulse of the narrator’s inner monologue. **Washing Shirts in Morocco** (a title so evocative it’s hard to believe it isn’t already an existing idiom) deftly compresses years of longing into a humble steam-warped calendar, a promotional give-away elevated to household relic, which becomes a beacon at a time of crisis. All three of these stories uncover moments of intensity and possibility for actuation, often long overdue, amidst the modest paraphernalia of everyday life.

Just as Lizzie, the narrator of **Three Red Rosettes**, knows “her patch”, I was convinced the writer knew theirs, and was on sure turf. I was immersed in Lizzie’s rediscovery of this altered corner of her known world, and likewise affected by the darkening, disorienting atmosphere that she experiences as she negotiates—and nearly falls prey to—a sudden gentrifying apathy. Certain fixed stars in her constellation have shifted, or been scrubbed from the map. But have the maps alone been altered, or has memory had a part in redrawing them, and just how much time has passed in between? These questions aren’t answered directly, and I found the story stronger, more resonant for the untold. A thoroughly different setting, and different concerns from John

Cheever's best-loved story, *The Swimmer*, but in reading (and rereading) **Three Red Rosettes**, I couldn't help drawing parallels between it and the older story's mesmerising, controlled shift of atmospheric pressure. Writing that is assured enough—and holds reciprocal assurance in its readers—to leave a little to interpretation, space for a reader to wonder into, and for a voice to resonate beyond the page.
