



mosman
**Youth
awards**
in literature
2023

Winning Entries

A collection of award winning short stories and poems from the 2023 Mosman Youth Awards in Literature

Acknowledgments

2023 Judges
Carol Jenkins, Deborah Kalin, Linda Lokhee, Zena Shapter
and Michael Sharkey

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This contest is organised by Mosman Library Service.



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History

As part of Mosman Council's Centenary Celebrations in 1993, the Mosman Youth Awards in Literature were inaugurated by Helen Egan, Marie Pitts and Cheryl Thomas, three friends who shared an interest and background in the education of young people.

These Awards, encouraging excellence in writing, have been made possible through profits from *Ferry to Mosman*, a book of black and white photographs and descriptive text, depicting the suburb of Mosman in the 1980s. This was a local bicentennial project. In recent years the Awards have been supported by sponsorships from local individuals and organisations.

The Ferry to Mosman Committee retired at the end of 2009 and handed over the organisation and running of the competition to Mosman Library Service.

Entry forms and information are available at the beginning of each school year through schools, libraries and Mosman Council's website at www.mosman.nsw.gov.au/youthawards

Two judging panels, whose members vary from year to year, generously give their time and expertise in deciding the winning entries. Certificates and monetary prizes are awarded at Presentation Night, held in August at the Mosman Youth Centre. All shortlisted entrants, families and friends are invited to attend.

Since its inauguration in 1993, this competition has become a fixture in Mosman Council's calendar of events. Entries are received from students attending local schools in Mosman, the North Shore, the Northern Beaches, as well as country regions in New South Wales. Its aim has always been to encourage young people to be interested in writing prose and poetry.

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winners

Primary Prose

First Prize	Betty by Violet Bloxson
Second Prize	The Big Sad Wolf by Bertram Haines
Highly Commended	Newbird Junior School by Owen McEvoy

Junior Secondary Prose

First Prize	Yosemite Grand Traverse by Evie Wang
Second Prize	Is There an End? by Madeleine Tripet
Highly Commended	I Lie by Audrey Li

Senior Secondary Prose

First Prize	The Feminine Pysche by Imogen Beletich
Second Prize	Seat With The Clearest View by Grace Butler
Highly Commended	Scars by Lexi Lynch

Junior Secondary Poetry

First Prize	Symphony No. 40 by Georgia Richards
Second Prize	Cracked in half, then divided in three by Caitlin Watters
Highly Commended	The Meeting Place by Caitlyn Saurajen

Senior Secondary Poetry

First Prize	Streetlamps by Maya Le Her
Second Prize	Hiroshima by Daniel Koppers
Highly Commended	Notification by Rebecca Ju





Winning Entries

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short stories from the 2023 Mosman
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Betty

Violet Bloxsom
Winner – First Prize
Primary Prose

“Elizabeth Augusta Brunswick, step forward,” boomed Officer Miller.

Elizabeth stumbled forward, her head bowed, her gentle eyes downcast.

“On this, the 22nd day of June 1910, at the Melbourne City Watchhouse, you are being remanded into custody.”

Miller squinted as he examined the scribbled notes on his clipboard and continued.

“The answer to all of my questions is ‘Yes Sir,’ do you understand?” It was a question but, of course, he wasn’t really asking.

“Yes Sir,” Elizabeth replied nervously, biting her rosy-pink bottom lip.

“Your date of birth is the 19th day of April 1891. Your place of birth is Richmond, Victoria. Your charge is disorderly conduct. Now step back in line,” he sneered as spit bubbled at the corners of his whisky mouth.

The officer continued along the dishevelled line of mostly men and a few women collected by the police that day, processing each one of them for various crimes including petty theft, public drunkenness and common assault. Miller wasn’t a tall man, so he compensated by puffing out his inadequate chest like a pigeon and deliberately lowering his voice in an attempt to appear intimidating.

The Watchhouse was part of the Melbourne Gaol complex, a collection of cold, cavernous bluestone buildings at the top of Russell Street; it was an imposing structure, like a stalking predator staring down passers-by and, with time, breaking down its occupants. The gaol housed prisoners there for a short time as well as notorious criminals in for the long haul. Conditions in the gaol were harrowing, the punishments unspeakable.

Elizabeth, or Betty as she was affectionately known, didn’t belong there. Only 19 years old, she was a talented seamstress who worked in a garment factory in Fitzroy. She was walking home from work when she was stopped by a couple of brutish police officers. Betty was simply giving them her name when they announced she was being disorderly. It was well known that the police would charge young women with fake offences because they needed workers in the prison kitchen and laundry.

Striding down the corridor, his leather boots heavy on the slate, Miller directed Betty and the other women into a cell much too small for all of them. He slid the steel bolt across the solid door to seal it and the clinking of his keys grew distant as he marched away.

Betty shivered as she changed into her prison uniform: a long grey skirt that skimmed the floor, a tight grey blouse from neck to wrist and a once-white bonnet to bundle untidy hair. She swapped her dainty leather lace-up shoes for tattered prison boots. The lights were switched off moments later and the cell was plunged into impenetrable darkness.

Well before the winter sun had risen the following day, the women were transferred from the Watchhouse to the gaol. They entered beneath the gallows, the thick ropes hanging from the solid wooden beam a macabre reminder of the ultimate consequence of crime. Betty was led to the damp and bitterly cold prison laundry where she would spend her days indefinitely.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, Betty scrubbed. Basket after basket, bucket after bucket, prison uniform after prison uniform. Her once soft skin wrinkled and calloused, her once manicured nails cracked and chipped. It was monotonous, relentless, back breaking work, all carried out in silence. Betty worked hard and kept quiet for she knew that those who dared to ask questions ended up in solitary confinement.

It was summertime when an unusual bundle was delivered to the laundry. Betty cautiously unwrapped the package to discover a neat pile of the warden's wife's clothes. A waft of lavender filled the air as Betty caressed the soft satin fabric of a billowy blouse between her aching fingers. She reached for a creamy white petticoat, tracing the intricate embroidery pattern of French knots and lazy daisy stitches at the hem. She embraced a sleek velvet corset and curled the burgundy laces through her hands, instantly transported back to the factory where she had perfected the art of sewing.

During the years that Betty laboured in the laundry, the warden's wife's clothes visited weekly and there was always something new to admire. Pretty petticoats, delicate pantyhose, heavy skirts with bustles. When no one was looking, Betty would hold her favourite pieces up to her slender body and twirl around the laundry tubs, free for a few precious moments.

It was on an execution day in 1915 that Betty Brunswick escaped Melbourne Gaol. Crowds had gathered in the forecourt, gossiping excitedly. Everyone loved a good hanging. This time it was Joseph Arthur Edwards, convicted of murdering his whole family. Known for being a violent and unpredictable prisoner, all of the prison staff were busy and distracted.

Down in the laundry, Betty stretched pantyhose over her bruised shins. She slipped a pastel pink petticoat over her bony hips. She pulled on a stiff corset, doing her best to adjust the thick laces at the back. She selected a freshly laundered blouse, arranging the frills around her neck and wrists. She adjusted bustles around her bottom and fluffed a heavy skirt to the ground, making sure to cover her prison boots. She swept her knotted locks into a bun at the base of her neck and, finally, she placed the warden's wife's finest straw sunhat atop her head. Dressed head to toe in stolen clothing, it had taken for Betty to go to prison to become a criminal.

Swiftly, silently, Betty slipped into the crowd. Her heart was pounding and she swallowed hard. She smiled politely as she sauntered past guards, pausing briefly among different groups of women so as not to appear suspicious. Betty took a deep breath and with a final look over her ruffled shoulder, she simply strode straight out of Melbourne Gaol, never to be seen again.

The Big Sad Wolf

Bertram Haines
Winner – Second Prize
Primary Prose

‘Ding,’ the elevator doors rattled open. Two tall figures stepped out into the light. They were both covered with thick grey fur, had long snouts, and giant sharp teeth. One of the figures bent down and licked the floor with a long pink tongue.

“Don’t you just love the taste of Wolf Industry, Wolfo?” said the figure who had just licked the floor.

“Unlike you, Wolfy, I am a sophisticated wolf who doesn’t lick dirty, dusty underground warehouse floors,” said Wolfo in a posh voice. Wolfo looked at his watch and started to run, panting like a dog.

Wolfy called from behind, “Wait up! You didn’t tell me we were going to be running today. If you did, I would have worn my Nike Air Maxes!”

“Shut up and run, you poorly mannered excuse for a wolf. We are going to be late for Wolf Con!” yelled Wolfo. Wolf Con is an annual event that happens every year where all the big bad wolves of Fairy Tale Land come together to see which fairy tale sold the most copies in the human world. Wolfo and Wolfy arrived just in time.

“Welcome, wolves, to this year’s Wolf Con!” said a female wolf dressed up finely. A series of cheering erupted from the crowd. “For three centuries, we wolves have been working hard starring in fairy tales, and I’m proud to announce that this year’s best-selling fairy tale is…” A drumroll erupted from the crowd.

“Red Riding Hood. This means that Wolfo, who has kindly starred in every edition of Red Riding Hood, has won the Best Villain Award!”

Wolfo stood up and walked onto the stage ready to receive his 299th Best Villain award.

“Wolfo, could you please give us a little speech,” said the presenter wolf.

“I thank my dad who took me to the park every weekend to practice eating little girls,” said Wolfo in a gruff, unenthusiastic voice. Wolfo disappeared behind the thick velvet curtain. After Wolf Con concluded, Wolfy went backstage to meet up with his best friend Wolfo, but he was nowhere to be found. Wolfy asked one of the staff at Wolf Con where he had gone. The staff member informed Wolfy that Wolfo had gone back to his dormitory. Wolfy thanked the staff member and hurried off to Wolfo’s bedroom. He opened the door only to find Wolfo crying. There were tissues scrunched up and littered all around the room.

“I wish that us villains could get some recognition. We never get stories named after us. Instead, they’re always named after those know-it-all heroes,” sobbed Wolfo. Wolfy tried and tried to comfort his friend, but nothing worked. He decided to let Wolfo have a good night’s sleep and hoped he would feel alright in the morning.

The next sunrise, Wolfy ran to Wolfo's bedroom, curious to discover how he felt. Wolfy was praying that his best friend was feeling better. He burst open the door only to find the window open with the curtains blowing furiously in the wind, the sheets were thrown back, and the wardrobe doors were left wide open. There was only one explanation, Wolfo had run away.

"This is bad, really bad!" said Pete, who is the head of the Wolf Security Corporation.

"I last saw him crying about not being a hero," informed Wolfy.

"Brilliant!" cried Pete.

"What do you mean?" asked Wolfy.

"He's obviously going to be at the Hero Industry," exclaimed Pete while jumping up in the air. Wolfy and Pete hopped in one of the company's complimentary cars and set a course for Hero Industry.

Once they arrived, they instantly saw Wolfo conversing with some of the biggest heroes in fairy tale history, including Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and even Snow White. They ran after him, hoping they could convince him that being a villain is alright. They finally caught up to him.

"Come back, being a villain is alright!" said Wolfy and Pete in unison, trying to sound enthusiastic and happy.

"Unless you can give me a reason, I'm not coming back," resonated Wolfo.

"Well villains make a story work," said Pete.

"Yeah, without you, Red Riding Hood would be booooooring!" said Wolfy.

"You got me there, partner," exclaimed Wolfo. "I'm coming back home!"

Wolfo, Wolfy, and Pete all rode back home in the company's complimentary jeep, knowing it's good to be bad.

Newbird Junior School

Owen McEvoy
Winner – Highly Commended
Primary Prose

It was a perfect summer's day at *Newbird Junior School*. Echoes of laughter bounced off the walls as children cheerfully played handball. Students swung on the monkey bars like actual monkeys. The basketball court was full of energetic athletes training hard! And best of all, every single student played fairly and nicely. Every single student, that is, except for one...

While everyone was having fun, even the teachers, Connor was sitting inside the detention room writing sentences.

Connor was a bully and a tormentor. He knew how to play fair, it's just that he didn't want to.

"Those stupid goody two-shoes are huge tattle-tales," he muttered. "It's just not fair!"

SLAM! "What're ye muttering, Conn'r? Swearing 'gain?"

Connor's answer to the question was totally off-topic. He instead shouted, "DON'T SLAM THE DOOR TO THE DETENTION ROOM TO ASK ME ANOTHER DUMB QUESTION, YOU BIG FAT BIRDBRAIN!"

See how rude and arrogant Connor is? It was enough to hurt Mr Binibor, the deputy head's, feelings. His eyes flooded with tears, and his usually cheerful face turned bright red with shame.

But that wasn't enough for Connor. Furious, he kicked the door open, breaking it, and stormed out of the detention room.

"Mum, the school is spoiling everything! I can't follow our plan when I'm in detention."

Connor's mum, an enormous, evil 42-year-old lady who could barely remember her times tables replied, "Tha? Uh... Ten? Um... ah, then! Then I wal... ah, will! Then I will give yar... ah, you! Then I will give you this weepan... ah, weapan... ah, weapon! Then I will give you this weapon!"

Connor's dad, a wiry, diabolical 42-year-old man whose intelligence was equivalent to Steven Hawking and Albert Einstein's combined, looked up from his workbench. "It'll surely be enough to destroy Newbird Junior School!" he chuckled. "It's a multifunctional helmet with a sword fighting function, an invisibility function, and the one I predict will be the most enjoyable in your perspective, the disco function."

Connor's face lit up with evil intent as his dad went on. "The disco function makes disco lights come out of the helmet. The sword fighting function makes a fencing foil pop out of the device and land in your hand, so you can hurt absolutely anyone in your way - in this case, the teachers at your school.

"The invisibility function obviously makes you invisible but only for 100 seconds at a time, so be careful, son. Now, are you clear what this helmet does and how you use it?"

"Yes." came the answer.

Now, before you read on, I want you to have a piece of information. Remember how I described Connor's dad as diabolical and Connor's mum as evil? And remember how Newbird Junior is a nice school? Well, now I think that you're wondering: "Why did Connor's parents send him to a nice school when they were evil people?"

The answer to this particular question was because Connor would destroy the school. As a larger-than-average young woman and a scrawnier-than-average young man, Connor's parents were bullied when they were at school. They both vowed to destroy all schools so that everyone would know how it felt to be like them.

Connor had been destroying schools since before he could walk. *St Niceypants's Kindergarten For Nice Children* was immediately torn down after a mysterious (and filthy) explosion in the boys' toilets. *Happiness College* was demolished after it had just been founded.

And *Kindness's Learning Institute For Well-Behaved Kids* was repeatedly hit by a wrecking machine that turned the lovely school into a big, grey cloud of dust.

Newbird Junior School was Connor's twentieth school to destroy. He didn't want to blow his one shot!

The day had come. Connor was wearing his helmet and nobody knew what was going to happen. The first period of the day was Information Technology. Connor snuck a couple of batteries and a USB from the teacher, Mrs Sheer's, drawer into his pocket. After Information Technology came Science. He silently dropped the USB and batteries into the liquid he was creating, which immediately started bubbling like a witch's brew...

BOOM! The green liquid jumped out of the glass jar and exploded. There were shocked expressions (and a little bit of grey explosion dust) on the pupils' faces. "What a great start to the day!" reacted Connor with a devilish grin. "Now," muttered Connor, "It's time for Part 2 of destroying the school!"

He reached up to the control unit at the back of his helmet and pressed the middle button marked DISCO. Before you could say 'I eat peas' as fast as you can, music blared out of nearby speakers and Connor danced along. While he was distracted by the disco, pupils threw handballs at him, dislodging the control unit. He was now aware of the students and teachers. He turned off the disco function and pushed the switch to the right marked SWORD FIGHTING. Unfortunately for Connor, the control unit malfunctioned and it took longer than usual for his weapon to appear.

While the SWORD FIGHTING function was uploading, the pupils of *Newbird Junior* took the clever opportunity to throw even more handballs at Connor. While he was dodging the flying red handballs, he had a great idea to turn on the INVISIBILITY function. Immediately, he became invisible and stripped off his clothes, to make sure the kids didn't see him...

"BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! INVISIBILITY MODE IS TURNING OFF!"

"But I thought it was 100 seconds!" Connor whined. It turned out that since his helmet was damaged, Connor's invisibility only lasted 1 second. Unfortunately for Connor, he didn't have time to worry about it, for everybody was bursting into tears of laughter seeing somebody naked at school.

Connor got put in detention for 30 years, and as far as I know, he is still there writing sentences on the whiteboard.

"I will not destroy schools naked. I will not destroy schools naked. I will not destroy schools naked..."

Yosemite Grand Traverse

Evie Wang
Winner – First Prize
Junior Secondary Prose

I unload my backpack from Sily's Toyota Corolla, and the car groans from the 25kg of weight lifted out its trunk, springing back up several inches. Sily gives me a pitying, tight-lipped smile and hands me the lunch she made for me in a ziplock bag. "You know," she says. "It's not too late to give up the walk. It's probably going to be a week of painful hiking."

I feel ashamed that I would even be tempted by the idea of returning home, so I shake my head, thank Sily for the ride and let my eyes follow her car out of the trailhead parking lot until it's a tiny speck in the distance. Then I slowly make my way to Tuolumne Meadow.

Mile 87

I reach Muir Trail Ranch and throw out the squashed fruits I had planned to eat along the way (as well as Sily's lunch I'm sorry to say), replacing them with fruit bars and nuts – before taking the first real shower I've had in days. I stand there until the water runs down, change into a pair of fresh pyjamas and fall asleep on the cotton blankets without even drying my hair. I wake up sometime later to my stomach growling insistently and so I order a regular cheese lover's pizza. I finish it all and call the reception back for another one.

Mile 130

Today I scraped both my knees. I had been walking along a mountain path framed by nothing but tall fir trees against a backdrop of forebodingly murky sky when my foot caught onto a gap in the rocks and my stomach lurched uncomfortably forward. My hands shot forward, but my hiking bag slid off my back and I saw only dark green canvas for a split second before a sharp, stabbing pain in my knees made me cry out. I disentangled myself from my backpack, pushed it away (pulled a muscle in the process) and tried standing up, but my legs gave way and I sat straight back down onto the sharp stones, getting nowhere apart from jabbing both of my palms. My eyes prickle with angry tears and I hastily wipe away with my hands. Bad mistake.

I just sat there feeling incredibly sorry for myself, ready to call the hike quits, until something wet passed over my face, and I looked up to see the great lolling tongue of a labrador retriever. Its great furry face nuzzled mine as I tried to sit up and automatically, I draped my arms over its neck in an embrace. The dog chuffed almost happily in response. A few moments later, the sound of boots on stone was followed by someone whistling and calling for 'Teddy'. The labrador barked as a tall, grey-haired woman headed down the trail towards us. She took one look at me – at my hiking back strewn on the ground, my knees and Teddy the labrador with my arms around its furry neck – then looked me in the eye and asked if I liked bread bowl tomato soup.

I know it's unwise to trust strangers, but my knees throbbed with pain, my stomach growled with the idea of indulging in comforting bread bowl soup and her kind eyes reminded me of you, so I followed her up the short side trail up to her home. She introduced herself as 'Pinky' and made two sourdough bowls of the best creamy tomato soup I've ever tasted. When I finished all of it in a few greedy gulps, she patiently ladled another overflowing spoonful of soup into the bowl.

After dinner, we sat down on her worn leather couch to talk lazily about our occupations and her quiet life up here in Mount Whitney. I told her that it wasn't my dream to climb along the Yosemite Trail, to traipse up and down mountains and live out of a backpack for half a month.

I told her it was always your dream, how you were always the adventurous sibling who searched for fun in every crevice of life. I told her how you would always beg me to attempt the Yosemite hike with you, and how I always let you down with hasty replies of 'maybe later' or 'next time'. But I should've known. How naive I was to think that time would wait for us; often hearts stop beating. And they never start up again. And ever since, I blame myself for the false hope I gave you, for taking the time I had left to be with you for granted. I blame myself for the fact that you waited faithfully for me, and now it's too late for you. This hike had been gratifyingly hard, and you would've loved it. I would've loved doing it with you.

It's still dark when I leave a large note and a fat little purse of jingling coins the next day at the front door of Pinky's house – in thanks to her hospitality – and leave for the campground at the top of Mount Whitney.

Mile 160

By the time I arrived at Mount Whitney junction it was nearly sunrise, my energy was depleted and the pain in my knees had faded into a dull throb. I'm tired beyond words but I drag my feet over to the camp ledge and throw down my bag. I open up the front pocket and a small white urn tumbles out into my blistered hands. It's time to let you go.

I unscrew the urn and sprinkle your ashes in the mountain wind. My tears fall unbidden as you spread your wings and fly away, gliding over the rocky paths, valleys and rivers of beautiful California. We're thru hikers now, you and me.

And I couldn't have ever done it without you.

Is There an End?

Madeleine Tripet
Winner – Second Prize
Junior Secondary Prose

I know it will happen soon.

It's that constant ticking in the back of your mind. The clock hands spinning, numbers blurring, sounds fading.

No, stay in the present. Don't think about it.

Stay here. Stay now

You can't run from it. You can't hide. It's always there, ever present. It never left, nor did it ever seem to arrive. It swallows up everything. The thick, heavy vapour. A dark blanket, clouding your mind your body. It steps closer and closer with every breath.

No stay in the present. Don't think about it.

Stay here. Stay now.

Maybe it was something that I did wrong, maybe the coin in the wishing - well never hit the bottom, or the candle never really blew out its light. Or maybe I'm just plain unlucky.

Either way I'm stuck like this.

Stuck with the darkness. The thoughts. Stuck with the constant adrenaline rushing, coursing through your veins. Stuck with the constant seeking for satisfaction. Stuck with the sudden urge to hit something.

The anger. The dread.

I'm stuck

Stuck being scared.

It's constant. Everyday. Every night.

In the day you try to act normal. Smile and wave. Make a joke. Don't tell them your insides are heaving and lurching. Don't tell them your mind is in chaos. Don't tell them about the night terrors. The darkness that you fade into every night. Just smile and wave. Act normal.

You think you're fine then it happens. It's the dark cloud that follows you. The darkness. It follows your every move. Like a shadow, a dark, tiresome, shadow, following you, stalking you. The constant reminder.

No, don't give in.

Don't give in

And then it happens.

The trigger gets set. The trigger releases.

The world falls apart.

The dizzy sick feeling, the shots of adrenaline, a whirlwind of thoughts.

I'm gonna die

I'm gonna die

Breathe just breathe. In for 5 out for 7

Breathe breathe breathe

Shake your fingers shake your toes.

It's happening again.

Your throat is closing up. Tightening. Squeezing. Capturing the air and vanishing it. Your heart is pounding at a million miles an hour. Your legs shake the very devil out of them.

Help

Help

Help

And then it's over. As soon as the wave comes it goes. Only it leaves a trail of fear, nested in your mind. The knowing that it will happen again, every little bit closer and sooner than the last time.

It is coming,

It is coming,

It's the storm that builds up. Tension in the atmosphere. Then all hell breaks loose.

Rain punches the innocent pelting them with cold, hard stones. Thunder shakes the living and the dead awake. Chaos fills the street. The darkness roars with triumph. It won.

Then quiet.

The eerie moment.

It's over.

Or is it?

The meeting went for ages. The smiling girl, in the smiling study. Fill in the papers. Do this test. Circle this.

Do you feel angry. Do you feel depressed. Do you feel scared?

Yes,

Yes

Yes

'No' came the answer.

continues on next page

However 'no' was wrong. And the lady knew it.

Test came out positive.

So it's true.

I am stuck this way.

Stuck with the constant nagging fear, of doubt and worry.

I'm stuck with anxiety.

The woman says she can help.

Fat chance.

The woman can go stuff herself. Who does she think she is asking about my life? She inspects me like an open book. Carelessly flipping the pages over, reading and staring at me with an unwavering eye.

Then she asks the question. The question that only keeps me in the world. The question I avoid so that the world stays together and doesn't fall apart.

The question.

"What are you so worried about?"

And honestly.

I don't know the answer.

Maybe it was that night when I walked into the room and knew it before I heard it.

One look betrayed it from my dad

The tear stained eyes looking at me for comfort, the lie embedded in his eyes 'It will be okay'. It never was okay, the cracked calloused hands that rubbed my head every night, shaking uncontrollably. The soft happy lips upended. The world was falling.

Free falling.

It was the car. One simple human invention that could ruin so many innocent lives. Maybe it was the metal. Or the four rusted wheels.. She stood no chance. She was dead before the ambulances arrived.

My own mother.

Gone.

I ran outside. To be free. Away from life. I felt trapped. A trapped bird in a cage, with broken wings, destined to never fly again. The pain was unbearable.

Mum. Gone forever.

Painful minutes turned into hours. Hours into days. Days into months. Until it became a year.

A year of sorrow. A year of sadness.

Maybe that was when the clock started ticking. When it first attacked me. The dark vapour first found me. Maybe I haven't always been this way.

There was a start. The first trigger. So maybe there is an end.

No,

There is an end

There is an end.

I Lie

Audrey Li
Winner – Highly Commended
Junior Secondary Prose

Immortalized in Prussian blue and dusky rose, I lie, beneath the vaulted ceilings painted by delicate brushstrokes. Centuries have blurred and faded into oblivion beneath this citadel, as I gaze upon hands stretching wistfully, tangled organza and silks strewn across the paintings.

Dust motes drift past me, and I lie, and they bury me like snow, settling onto my tired, time-worn face. I have no hands to brush them away with. Enshrined in cracking paint and tarnished bronze, my fingers reach ardently into the firmament, into the emptiness.

Images drift into my mind as I lie, a rippling curtain, a bowl, but I can't see what's in it. A pear, or a plum, maybe, or something stranger, a pomegranate. I wonder what it is like to be hungry, because I have never been hungry. My mind romanticizes tiredness, not the centuries of weariness I have endured here, nor the sickeningly sweet void of this twisted immortality, but a human fatigue – a lifelike languor.

The doors open and throngs of people rush into the gallery, as if taken by an unseen waterfall. I lie, and they gawk vacantly at me, like dumbfounded sardines. A mundane static rustles through the crowds. Like asphodel, blooming like a Greek garland. Occasionally I catch the eye of some girl, and in my fantasies, I feel the stickiness of sugar on her fingers. Or some woman in her prime, like I was once, wearing a black velvet coat, and a fleeting, silent understanding passes between us. In another time, in another place, *I could have been you*. You could have been me. *But I am not you*, and you will never know what it is like, *this hollowness, this lack of somethingness, this timelessness of what was, and what no longer will be*. I blink, and there is silence again.

So I look down and imagine my own lifeless and crumpled form, and I lie, in my mind's eye, there on the centuries-old hardwood floor of the gallery, as it would be if I were still alive today; withering, fading, so strikingly and abhorrently different to this masquerade, my likeness preserved for centuries behind this painted facade. I hear the echoes of souls, bound to time, this place before it became a gallery, the artists who poured their existence and a part of themselves into these paintings. The priests, and the nuns that busied themselves piously down the hallways.

Sister, they whispered conspiratorially to each other, *sister*. I looked at the paintings and thought to myself tongues would've wagged at some of the newer paintings. *Blasphemous, whorish*, even. I remembered the maid who dragged the wine-dipped cloth against the floorboards, my silent companion.

It is strange to think that they were not ideals or mere effigies, but people too, people who looked at the same star-studded skies, people who laughed and smiled, people who had the same foolish, foolish dreams to break free of society's dreams of them. *Past, present and future*.

I can't remember what it was like, to feel the sun against my face, or the sensation of warm skin against mine. If I was ever *real*, if I ever lived, or if I was merely a figment of the painter's imagination who painted my rosy cheeks, my chestnut hair. I realize, with a growing resentment that prickles my skin, that I have never known my own face, only what *he* described to me. What if I wasn't at all what I thought to be? What if I was never like that, only to be sculpted to their convoluted standards of beauty, the revered Venus? Or was it I who was grotesque, or convoluted, even? The curiosity tickles me like a knife.

I lie and await the fall of darkness as the sleeper goes easily into the dying light, and wonder if I lie to myself, or perhaps if they lied to me. I gaze upon the moonlight streaming through the French windows and the curiosity is agonizing, like a knife's edge. *Don't leave, they said, or something terrible will come to pass.* Except this time, the words are faraway, and blur into each other. I realize the pomegranate in my mind's eye is rotting, and I recall the myth of the Roman goddess and her promise, her twisted fate. I do not know how I know these things, I do not remember. I realize they have stolen my life from me, and all these years, they lied, and I lie, still.

Freeing myself from the canvas is easier than I imagined, in my feverish, anachronistic fantasies. It occurs to me I have worshipped this moment, or the mere notion for it, for many years. How long has it been? The void left in the canvas by their mould they created for me is torn at the edges, perfectly right. I step into the moonlight I have gazed upon for all these years, and in the empty gallery the epiphany of it all is liberating, fulfilling. My arm looks almost translucent in the moonlight, my veins like bruised plum, and yet it is beautiful. A soft whisper escapes my lips as my fingers brush the glass of the forsworn mirror. The words return to me, clearer now, but I put them out of my mind. The light is fading.

Just one glance.

My eyes lock with my reflection, and I see myself for a fleeting moment in timelessness, in eternity, in immortality, before I crumble into dust.

The curtain falls away.

The pomegranate is gone.

The Feminine Pysche

Imogen Beletich
Winner – First Prize
Senior Secondary Prose

Once upon a time, there lived an old man. He was a quiet, ordinary sort of fellow. Not particularly intelligent, nor particularly attractive, charming or witty.

Just average.

Perhaps the only noteworthy part of his otherwise mundane life was a small glass snow globe that made its home on his bedside table. He was fond of this snow globe; with its faraway forest and tiny clearing, in which lived a tiny fairy, labelled Theia V. To him, Theia's comings and goings were of no particular importance, after all, it was not as if she could every truly go anywhere.

And why should she want to? He provided her with everything, a perfect minute empire. And so, for a while, Theiawas happy. In blissful, tranquil silence.

But, after a lifetime alone with her thoughts, the silence began speaking. Every thought, every feeling, echoing through the cave of her skull, her heartbeat a relentless swell pounding in her ears, slowly eating deeper in the cave's darkness. And deep inside, her soul was trapped. Drowning. Gasping for air, begging for change. Mindlessly, her feet began carrying her towards the horizon, towards something new.

Her footsteps seemed to placate the ocean swell; time itself falling into their rhythm. Until eventually, she reached the edge of the forest. Incredulous, Theia reached out her hand – desperate to feel a world beyond hers. Immediately, she recoiled - shocked to feel her palm meet the cool, hard glass of the empire's horizon. She gazed outwards, at the white sky she'd always known. And, for the first time in her life, a man gazed back.

Her eyes met the cool blue of his. Eerie familiarity filled them; lit up with delight at his perfect possession. However, behind their crinkled warmth, lay a cruelty - a clouded, callous stare. Instinctively, she shrunk inwards, turning her back on her unseen voyeur. Numb, she stumbled away, scouring the forest in search of a refuge from his piercing glare.

And yet -

She saw him still.

In the days following, Theia could not bring herself to leave the clearing. Something had shattered within her – some fragile illusion of freedom now irrevocably lost. Memory only served to magnify his gaze through the glass; her existence nothing but an observation under its microscope. Her life no longer her own. Because every second of it was spent wondering –

Was he watching?

Did he watch how her hands shook as she tied her hair?

Did he watch as she boarded up her cottage windows; desperately trying to keep him out?

Did he see when she woke in the night, drenched in an icy river of dread – his eyes burning her soul?

Did he know that even unheard; his voice echoed through her skull,

until her own was barely a whisper, a flickering spark drowning in the storm.

She could not help but find herself wholly fixated on him. Even within her the endless plains of her psyche; she could not escape him. Ever watching. Ever judging.

He lived there - behind the curtains of her conscious – her own personal voyeur. A calculating director, watching her thoughts from the wings. She became acutely aware of herself,

how she looked,

how she spoke,

how she moved –

a mere prop on his stage. Hours spent analysing his glances, playing guessing games with his thoughts. Every decision she made, dissected.

But somewhere inside - she grieved the blissful oblivion of Before. Missed the fragile façade of sovereignty. She hated him for it. Hated herself too – the way she yearned to catch that glimmer of validation in his eyes; like the sun glistening off the ocean; a mirage of warmth concealing the icy waters beneath. Until -

Slowly.

Gradually.

Rage began to grow from the hatred, like a weed in the pit of her stomach.

Pulsing under her skin.

Pounding in her bones. Her chest, her throat. Its roar filled her ears –

louder

Louder

LOUDER.

It was an infection – polluting her head until she couldn't think, couldn't breathe around it.

How dare he.

How *dare* he watch her.

Judge her.

continues on next page

The rage enveloped her; until she began physically burning with it. Sparks flew from her wings, her hair – catching on anything and everything they could find.

Time slowed, reality blurring, until all she could see was him. And it could have been inside her head, but she swore those were his eyes against the glass – filled with panic as his kingdom burned.

The fire blazed brighter at the sight of it. Flames danced and leaped – their blood-red tongues racing from tree to tree in a desperate sprint of fury, of grief, of ecstasy.

Fiery red engulfed her vision, and her entire world began to tumble.

Falling,

falling,

falling.

w e i g h t l e s s

And just as she felt the glass sky shatter beneath her - she saw them.

A kaleidoscope of perfect glass empires just like hers. Fairies,

Just. Like. Her.

.....

He bent down, careful not cut himself on the shimmering glass pinpricks – now scattered across the bedroom floor. Hastily, he swept up the smoking debris, the fairy's perfect décolletage now adorned in a glittering necklace of glass. He supposed it was unfortunate that he had unwittingly designed such a necklace when he knocked the globe.

"Oh well. It wasn't a pretty one anyways," he mumbled to himself, turning to admire another - Theia CIV.

Seat With The Clearest View

Grace Butler
Winner – Second Prize
Senior Secondary Prose

An Astronaut looking unfathomably tired detaches a torn rope from his space suit.

The Astronaut sighs and stares at the space passing around him. It is beautiful in an unsettling manner, like staring into the abyss that blinks back.

“It was always going to end this way. You get what you give and I’ve never given enough” he says coldly.

Sound does not travel in space, this admission is for an audience of one in the echo chamber of his rounded helmet.

“The posters say our souls seed the stars, we forget that stars are all barren and careless metal. Seeds don’t grow out here.”

He remembers his days at the academy through the haze of nostalgia. He’d always been the one left behind, untethered.

The Astronaut enlisted to stand on the edge of the final frontier.

He’s been cheated by the alluring, waxing crescent smile of the moon. Space from a distant window was a heart shaped face with a mouthful of glinting pearls, cupid’s bow lips and empty promises.

From earth it felt like warmth. Now it’s an ache, a spear in his side.

A beep shakes the Astronaut out of his self-pitying, the screen on his vambrace reads low oxygen in an alien language. The Astronaut laughs like a man facing a firing squad.

“One billion years of evolution and we still make all the same mistakes...”, he mutters.

Reaching too far too fast, and regretting it before even reaping the reward.

The Astronaut curls in on himself, the vacuum of space is cold and his thermo-regulation unit is unresponsive. He floats in silence for some time, the panicked and discombobulate cries of his suit keep him company. The mechanical sound of the Astronaut’s breathing can be heard. Its soft like he’s sleeping.

In the distance, a star takes its last breaths. Its final words are an explosion of luminosity so bright the earth of distant planets will remember it, a geological epitaph. Its light will not reach the Astronaut for thousands of light years, or perhaps it never will. Either way it’s the last point of illumination in the universe.

A ragged pant slips in and disrupts the four beat tempo of his exhale.

The Astronaut looks as if he is considering taking off his helmet. His fingers fiddle with the rim, dangerously close to the seal.

The vacuum around him will suck the air out of his lungs like a vicious punch to the chest, or more cynically the Astronaut considers, like a kiss. It would be a mess, it would be hell.

He touches the release valve featherlight, the pit of his stomach contorts itself.

The Astronaut clears his throat, the sudden sound is shattering.

His breath wavers, he is utterly alone.

The rubber band of existence is at its snapping point, the world will cave and devour itself in an agonising and prolonged monologue.

In the Astronaut's mind there are familiar strangers who remember his name and face. These people are stardust one billion light years away, shipwrecked in an asteroid field. The Astronaut will die with his reflection shrouded by polarised glass and his name clenched between his teeth.

In deep space, tidal waves swallow galaxies whole. Stars protest with mournful whale song before being stamped out. Dark ships haunt the endless horizon and Saturn's rings rust like a well worn wedding band.

The Astronaut is a man marching to the gallows.

Back against the wall, last cigarette a flare between his lips. His oxygen tank readings, a sergeant's countdown as the air around him grows heavy with desperation.

The proverbial rifle loaded, cocked, aimed.

The supernova a lifetime away burns the last of its hydrogen with volcanic passion. It rivals Helen with her thousand ships. It gives the impression of something both beautiful and annihilating.

There are memories tucked in the back pocket of the Astronaut's mind. Photographers with undeveloped film clutched to their chests like Madonna and child, entombed in pyroclastic flow.

Lovers in Valdarò with hands intertwined in a final embrace, making a bed of their coffin.

The Astronaut reflects on his own cataclysmic demise. It's not melancholic, rather a quiet admission of circumstance and nothing more.

The supernova in a far away galaxy finishes its rendition of the epics. It has eaten its young, in its own celestial cycle of violence.

The Astronaut has no way of knowing the passage of time. His oxygen tank has been crying out for hours now. In a fit of irritation he rips the connection between the tank and his vambrace, he doesn't need the reading to know how this goes.

"This is how the world ends..." He whispers. *"Not with a bang but with a whimper."*

The edges of the Astronaut's vision blur. The supernova contracts and shatters.

Scars

Lexi Lynch
Winner – Highly Commended
Senior Secondary Prose

I have a lot of scars. Whether mental or physical, I had a story behind each and every one. The smallest one of all left the biggest lasting impact though. Scars have a funny way of doing that.

At the time, I thought it was just about to be another typical day, at a typical underfunded, poverty-stricken high school, with graffitied bathrooms that reeked of old vapes and tables held together by gum from the class of '02. And in a way, it was. Someone got beaten up, someone ended up crying and someone ended up victorious. That being said, I'm not usually the one who ends up victorious. I've been a scrawny imp-sized kid for my entire life; the doctors were even worried that I might not make it when I was born. The only one who has ever actually believed in me was my dad. I guess he should've believed in himself a little less though, specifically his driving skills after 8 beers.

When I arrived at school that day, I thought it would just be another day of sitting in Maths while staring at the back of Avery Caddell's head, walking laps in PE, sleeping my way through Biology and contemplating my life choices in English. You know, the usual. But what I wasn't expecting was to be cornered by the biggest buffoons in the school right after PE. Ashton Madden and Julien Barlowe had been 'friends' since Pre-K, beating up anyone who got in their way. Their large, round figures in primary school slowly grew into tree trunk-sized biceps in high school, making them an invincible duo. Physically, I was surprised that they had somehow managed to grunt and point their way this far up their education.

That day they had decided that their target would be me. It wasn't the first time of course, as they eventually ran out of people to bully in our tiny school. I was the first lucky one to be chosen for the 8th time earlier this year. I suppose their aim that day was to make me the lucky first to get to 9 as well. How flattering. There were only 5 people in the whole school who had never had the pleasure of becoming intimately acquainted with Ashton and Julien's fists. Avery Caddell, Mary Laurier, a Swedish guy who spoke no English but was fitter than Ashton and Julien put together, and oddly enough Ashton and Julien themselves. Between their 2 braincells, one would think that they would've tried to kill each other by now.

As they hulked their way over to me, I weighed up my options: run, potentially get caught and get beaten up even worse or stay and face at least a concussion and black eye. Remembering what happened the last time someone tried to out-run them, I decided to try out-smart them instead.

"Oi, Witlock," Julien grunted at me when they finally got within punching distance. "We need to talk."

"I'd love to boys, I really would, but I have a Bio test to fail in a minute and I really should be punctual for that," I said, smirking as their faces screwed confusedly. "Now unless it's important, I'll be on my way."

However, instead of just standing and looking dumb while I left, the imbeciles cornered me and went on to *politely* explain to me how they wanted my help in Maths. The principal had threatened to take them off the AFL team if they didn't manage to get over 30% in their next test. They even offered me a pretty good deal: I would become the newest member of the elite group of people who didn't get beaten up. What a deal.

The only real problem with their little plan was that I wasn't interested. I knew that the minute I tried to correct them on any of their work, they would get angry and beat me up anyway, regardless of any 'deal' we had in place. So, I made a decision. Potentially one of my dumbest ones in my life. I said no.

I would be lying if I said that I didn't enjoy the looks on their faces as they struggled to comprehend what had just happened. Someone had told them no. So as their faces contorted with anger, I took my chance, running to Biology. And yet even though I had managed to escape them, I didn't manage to escape the future scar I got on my chin a minute later, when I tripped over the wooden ledge in the Lab and face planted onto the tiles. 'Life sure has a funny way of celebrating my wins,' I thought to myself, as the grey tiles became decorated with flecks of red.





Winning Entries

A collection of award winning
poems from the 2023 Mosman
Youth Awards in Literature

Symphony No. 40

Georgia Richards
Winner – First Prize
Junior Secondary Poetry

My predicament sits comfortably within the confines of G minor.

Sentimental - I yearn
To be looked at as if
When every star in the sky blinked out
You wouldn't notice,
Because I'd outshine them all.
Sad - I wish
To be one of those very stars.
I want to burn brightly and combust all at once; an intergalactic metamorphosis,
If it might mean
I could escape this cloying, deadening haze,
Where all I can smell is your breath
When you told me to leave.
Dreamlike - I try
To escape those periods of lucidity,
Because if I gave myself time to think I know
Even in the depths of death,
My soul would never tire in its pursuit of you.

We must be Mozart's greatest tragedy,
B flat and E flat,
I should have known
Our love would be just that:
For those without passion.
I should have known,
Somewhere in the maze separating G and F,
Your gaze would leave my silhouette,
Whoever composed our song forgot to warn me that I
Would become just another stupid semiquaver on your crooked staff.

So when I rest my weary soul on the stool of this piano,
And my fingers find our chord,
I will neglect to remember:
The G, starting where my love blossomed for you,
The B flat, all alone in a sea of black keys,
The D, a Dead end where, in solitude, I will cry myself a symphony.
Instead I will raise my left hand,
The one you used to hold and kiss,
Off the notes you etched into my soul,
And I will play my cacophony of heartbreak, in a B flat major, for I am comprised of sound.
And one day,
When you, the song stuck in my head, have faded from an incessant ring to a weak whisper,
I will dance to a G minor with a different silhouette.

Cracked in half, then divided in three

Caitlin Watters
Winner – Second Prize
Junior Secondary Poetry

I am two sides cracked in half.
Asian and Australian
Then divided into three.
Australian, Cambodian, and Thai
lie inside of me.

Gum trees and lotus petals
Stripes, orange and black
Number three out of 12
Courageous, assertive, natural leader
loyal, protective, reserved.
A crab scuttling through the sands of my culture
But I don't feel like a natural leader.
Do the Chinese zodiac signs really tell me who I am?
Or do the western star signs tell me exactly what i am?

My ancestors came on boats and planes.
Sailing across the ocean
For a crime that they made in desperate times
Escaping a life of war
Losing their home to terrorists
Wanting a better life
Finding a home
A family
That leads to my home.
~~And family~~

Noodles, sausages, rice, burgers
Pizza, soup, pasta, dumplings
My mouth savours both
But inside my stomach
Are noodles, rice, soup, dumplings
Does liking Asian food much better make me any less western?
I am Asian

I don't wear my shoes inside.
I am Western
I sometimes don't take my shoes off before I go inside.
I get red envelopes at Chinese New Year
Clean crisp notes
The lucky 8
I go on easter egg hunts at Easter.
Between the 22 march and the 25 of April
My ancestors look down from two separate trees
One home to dragons with serpent bodies and no wings
Beasts that are kind, loyal and protectors
One home to dragons with wings and fiery breath
Beasts that kill, burn, and spread chaos

I walk the Great Wall of China
I walk outside Buckingham Palace
I walk Angkor Wat and The Grand Palace.
but most of all
I walk the Sydney Harbour Bridge
I am intertwined in string
All my culture tied together
European, Cambodian, Thai.
Australian

The Meeting Place

Caitlyn Saurajen
Winner – Highly Commended
Junior Secondary Poetry

Across four lands, my blood was drawn –
from forest floor to soaring peaks;
Then, wrapped in flesh, one living form
found East and West in me reborn:
A meeting place of bones and teeth.

The first they called Jambudvipa;
Divorced by sacred Ganges' flow.
'Twas from those depths she drew my eyes:
Two midnight almonds in disguise
were nestled in the powdered snow.

The second, known by many names:
Chixian, Shenzhou, Zhonghua and Xia.
From dynasties of dragon's flame,
she weaved my skin of porcelain
and marked its age from year to year.

The next, a land of sparkling stars;
Of wooden shoes and spinning sails
with tulip blankets stretched afar
to hide her bomb and bullet scars –
She knit my hair, from barley bales.

Old Albion was last in line
with armoured knights and royal reign –
Through stories from the start of time,
my childish spirits were refined
on ghostly cliffs and Moorish plains.

So, here I stand – the meeting place
where fear and fortune intertwine!
As past and future now embrace
and fate herself, through time and space
retells my tale, with perfect grace:
What's mine is hers; and hers, is mine.

Streetlamps

Maya Le Her
Winner – First Prize
Senior Secondary Poetry

And walking with you in the spilled ink of night,
Feet stepping backwards to keep up the whirl of words,
Head turning, ears whirring with the rush of passing cars
And the feeling
that this is infinite

Walking back from the library,
streetlamps like yellow flames against the trees
I saw your face in the hue of kerosene blue
The firelight beckoning, beckoning, against your tongue
A dissection of *The Handmaid's Tale*
And how Atwood paints a masterpiece
In prose and poetry and the sacred overlap,
The space in between,
in which we find the freedom
to breathe

Bodies animated, laughing and ditching
literary events, winding a line
From the institution to our homes,
bag so heavy on my back
I miss these nights, tinged orange and matchstick red
I miss the way you'd laugh at things I'd said,
And tell me truths that made me forget
your cruelty

The coolness of you, how you could snap
into impassive blue
And smile upon reflection,
but only out of vague obligation,
A deliberate sculpting of the lips
To form something socially acceptable
You never replied to calls or emails or texts or voicemails
Became a ghost against grey sky,
lips devoid of warmth
Until the next time, a message arriving, asking
If I wanted to meet at the library

I showed up with a bunch of hand-picked daisies,
Which you told me were beautiful and put in a glass of water in your house
They were still there two weeks later, growing new arms and blooms
Like the cuttings that form horticulture in your bedroom,
Green snaps in washed-out glass coke bottles

Let the light in through the trees
Let the light in through the water
Let the light in through the trees,
As we walk home in semi-darkness
Save for the orbs of streetlights,
Orange and blue against your cheeks.

Hiroshima

Daniel Koppers
Winner – Second Prize
Senior Secondary Poetry

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light
14 billion years ago type chrome
#ffea00
#f29b0f
#ed0000

The witness, Aeolus was overcome with envy
For it ripped the soul from machiya
Without his consent

"Looks like a jellyfish", daughter said
And daughter was gone
Night shadows carved into the pavement

Spread like a crater, cretaceous type end
Do you know my good friend Thanatos?
66,000 friendly new face
Shaking hands

Enola Gay has a formula for you
Forager's fungus + sheep without legs
Tell Mōri Terumoto not to waste his time
It's just going to get flattened anyways

We were the ones who let there be light
Are we God?

Notification

Rebecca Ju
Winner – Highly Commended
Senior Secondary Poetry

I squint at the bright stream of light
evanescent glitter from my phone
where I threw it against the wall
glass like scorched earth
on a long drought

querencia
the body opens
adrenal glands release dopamine
that flow through bone dry veins
dried red paint on the walls

intoxiated on curiosity
saudade spirits burn down my chest
languid claws dig into flesh
you stupid bitch
you killed the cat

shards cut into soft palms
and under epidermal cells
they nestle seraphic
weeping tremulous drops
a hot wet tongue sweeps away

resplendent knives cut into retinas
am I crying or bleeding?
these carmine creeks
carving down granite cheeks
paint so beautifully

lungs expand in vacuum
humming with a siren song
I lick the pink
sweeter than dollar icecream
on a chilly day

her shadow a stain
inky scarlet hands grasp mine
snatch a breath that
drags you under sticky molasses
inhale my syrupy delirium

I squint at the dying stream of light
moonlight glitter from my phone
where I threw it against the wall
glass like morning dew
on an ocean wave







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