



mosman  
**Youth  
awards**  
in literature  
**2024**

# Winning Entries

A collection of award winning short stories and poems from the 2024 Mosman Youth Awards in Literature

## Acknowledgments

2024 Judges  
Carol Jenkins, Deborah Kalin, Linda Lokhee, Zena Shapter  
and Michael Sharkey

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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](http://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 stories and poetry.

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# winners

## **Primary Story**

First Prize	Racing Home by Isabelle Wood
Second Prize	Sam the Singing Sardine by Patrick Bloxsom
Highly Commended	Manipulator's Game by Moana Chujo

## **Junior Secondary Story**

First Prize	Arachne's Metamorphosis by Esther Li
Second Prize	Hide and Seek by Emma Devoy
Highly Commended	The Three of Us by Violet Bloxsom

## **Senior Secondary Story**

First Prize	Painting of The Woman and the Flowers by Emily Kim
Second Prize	Brotherhood by Ruby Burke
Highly Commended	12:35, It's Lunchtime by Chloe Leung

## **Junior Secondary Poetry**

First Prize	The Beef Procedure by Ariel Spencer
Second Prize	Hourglass by Katherine McDiarmid
Highly Commended	Infinity String by Ariel Bai

## **Senior Secondary Poetry**

First Prize	New Year's Eve by Maya Le Her
Second Prize	Day in the life of a universe by Kara Wong
Highly Commended	birdman by Esther Schroeter





# Winning Entries

A collection of award winning  
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# Racing Home

Isabelle Wood  
Winner – First Prize  
Primary Story

## **Retired Racer – Day 1**

Is this my home?

I'm in a kennel. It's not my own. There's a worn squeaky toy that looks like a cow. There's a sign on the door. It says *Neptune*. I think it's my name. My thoughts are racing through my head.

*Why am I here?*

*What am I doing?*

*Where is my trainer?*

They're still going as I drift off into an uneasy sleep.

## **Retired Racer – Day 2**

The Happy lady is back.

She puts down a bowl filled with meat and kibble. *Meat*. I've had it once, and I was like sunshine and rainbows. I wolf down my meal in a flash. She laughs and rubs me. I lean into her.

*Hello little greyhound. I'm Gina. I'm going to find you a new home.*

She rubs me some more. I'm a bit confused.

Isn't this my home?

## **Retired racer – Day 5**

She's back again. The Gina lady.

She puts down my usual breakfast of meat and kibble. I gulp it down in a flash. She smiles, a little sadly, and rubs me. I'm confused. Why is she sad?

*I've found you a new family, she whispers, you'll be happy, Neptune.*

My ears perk up at my name. This time she laughs, then closes the kennel door and walks away.

I'm left by myself, both nervous and excited.

Will I be going to my home?

## **Retired racer – Day 11**

I'm back in my kennel. They didn't even keep me for a week.

Gina led me to a large pen, like a house, but with grass, and trees, and a pond. On the side of the room, there was a couch.

On the couch, there was a scrawny man, a tired lady and a bawling child throwing a tantrum.

*I want to look good! I want to save a dog! GIVE ME THE DOG!!!* The girl yelled, kicking her mother. The dark circles around her eyes seemed to sag even further, and the wrinkles deepen as she handed the money over to Gina.

I wagged my tail.

In the car, the girl was still bawling, *I WANT TO CALL IT PRINCESS! WHY CAN'T I CALL IT PRINCESS?!*

She screamed the whole way to the house.

I still wagged my tail.

\*\*\*



On the first day, the girl rubbed me and crooned over me, and gave me toys shaped like princesses, which I expertly shredded.

On the second day, she rubbed me and crooned over me, but it seemed more forced, more rough.

On the third day, I heard The Bawling girl scream at her parents.

*I HATE THE DOG! She does NOTHING I want to do! She is STUPID!*

On the fourth day, I was left outside. It was raining, and I huddled under the shed.

On the fifth day, I was in the same place. I hadn't had any food, and it was still raining.

On the sixth day, the rain had stopped. The tired mother came out of the house, smiled at me, and hooked the worn leash in her hand to my collar.

*Come on*, she said, and guided me to the car. *This isn't your home.*

I was still confused.

Then where is my home?

### ***Retired racer – Day 18.***

Gina brought me a new toy today, along with my food. It's a bone made of purple rubber, and squeaks when I chew it.

*Squeak!*

*Squeak!*

*CRACK!*

The squeaking stops. I spit the two halves of the toy out of my mouth and slump my head against the metal wiring. The question that had been distracted by the toy now worms its way into my pointed head.

*Will I ever be going home?*

### ***Retired Racer – Day 25***

Gina can't cheer me up.

She hasn't been able to for days.

I doubt she ever will be able to.

*It's okay, baby. I promise I will find you a home.*

Her words are nothing.

I know I will never find a new home.

### ***Retired Racer – Day 31***

Gina seems nostalgic when she comes to give me breakfast this morning.

She smiles at me and tells me the news.

*I found you a home, Neptune. I found you a home.*

My ears perk up.

Gina smiles and walks away, leaving me with my own thoughts.

Do I want to go to a new home?

### ***Retired racer – Day 35***

Gina comes again to my kennel. She hooks my leash onto my collar, and leads me to a large pen, where I met the other family. There's a woman sitting in an armchair.

*'Neptune, this is Kayla. Kayla, this is Neptune.'*

Kayla smiles. Her eyes are a warm but have dark circles under them. Her clothes seem happy and fun, but they're worn.

*'I'll leave you two to bond,'* says Gina, closing the gate. We're alone.

I look at Kayla. Then at the gate. Then at Kayla again. I tentatively walk up to her. Her hand is outstretched, and I sniff it. She rubs me. I lean into the pat.

*'Hello Neptune. Gina told me what you've been through. You don't deserve that. Would you like to come home with me?'*

I wag my tail and jump up and down. Kayla laughs.

And I know I've found my home.

### ***Retired Racer – Day 40***

Since going into Kayla's home, Kayla and I have settled into a comfortable routine.

I wake her up, she takes me for a walk, she gives me breakfast. Then I nap. Then I nap some more. Then Kayla eats lunch. I go for another walk. Then I sleep. And sleep. Then I have dinner. Then Kayla has dinner. We watch TV together. And then it's night, and I go to sleep, until morning.

My food is my second favourite thing.

But my favourite?

I've finally raced home.



# *Sam the Singing Sardine*

Patrick Bloxsom  
Winner – Second Prize  
Primary Story

Sam was a sardine. A simple sardine. Dull grey scales from head to tail and dark round eyes like orbs reflecting the depths of the ocean. Sam was identical to the billion other sardines in his school, except for one thing that is.

Sam was a sensational soprano singer! The only sardine in Port Jackson that could hit Top C! Fish had been travelling from as far away as the Great Barrier Reef to hear Sam sing. After his performances, Sam would graciously sign autographs and politely accept bunches of sea flowers. He was a humble fish, as you might expect from a sardine, so he never understood why the pufferfish always blew up when he waved to them or why the salmon always turned a deeper shade of blush when he looked their way.

Sam had been a member of the coral choir since he was a juvenile and, with his recent rise to fame, everyone was expecting him to earn the leading role in Humpback's Messiah. With its stirring choruses and sublime solos, the famous concert was to be held beneath the Sydney Opera House where the vibrations from the orchestra pit above could be felt in the waters. Auditions were coming up and Sam needed to impress the ocean renowned conductor, the one and only, Ross the Wrasse!

Craig was a crab. A crabby crab. Protective blue-green shell and beady eyes perched atop stalks forever on the lookout. Craig was a talented singer back in the day and he still considered himself to be the ocean's leading tenor.

Craig had become fiercely jealous of Sam. His rage was out of control. He had performed in Humpback's Messiah every year since he was a young crab and there was no way he was going to let Sam, a baitfish for goodness' sake, steal the algae-bloom-light. Craig was prepared to do anything so that Sam would miss the audition.

"I will squash that Sam like a sea slug," he muttered to himself, "I will pummel him like a prawn."

Sam versus Craig.

Soprano versus Tenor.

Up-and-coming young star versus washed up old crustacean.

On the day of the audition, Craig put his devious plan into action. He waited in the seagrass shadows for the sardine school bus to arrive. A number of other sardines were also auditioning, and they all eagerly piled off the bus. The problem for Craig, of course, was that he couldn't tell Sam apart from the others. He crept out and decided just to call his name.

"Sam. Over here. It's your pal Craig. I thought we could warm up together," Craig smirked.

Sam didn't hear him.

But Pam did.

"Oh, how nice of him," thought Pam. Pam was a sunny sardine, some would say ditzy. Bubbleheaded even. But always looking on the bright side.

Pam happily swam over to Craig. Craig simply assumed she was Sam.

"Did you know that singing inside of an anemone strengthens your vocal chords?" Craig lied.

Pam beamed, "Wow, really!" Surely all fish know that anemones are meat-eating fish traps! How could Pam have no idea!

Craig didn't even need to say another word. Pam darted inside the nearest Starburst Anemone and ZAP! Poor Pam.

Craig was stunned. The pieces of his plan were all sinking into place. He scuttled off for the audition as fast as possible, joyfully humming the tune to 'Behold, the Crab of God' as he went.

Bursting through the coral choir room doors, Craig couldn't quite believe his eyes. There was Sam, surrounded by the sopranos, alongside the altos, together with the tenors and breathing - HOW ON EARTH WAS HE BREATHING - with the bass! Not only that, Ross the Wrasse had Sam front and centre and already practising the leading part.

Craig started shaking, it was uncontrollable. He started to sweat profusely, even though crabs don't sweat. He tried to speak but only a few bubbles came out. And then came the tantrum. An almighty tantrum. Yelling, screaming, hitting, kicking, stomping. An explosion of jealousy and anger. Let's just say Ross the Wrasse swiftly escorted Craig, now a bright orange crab, from the choir room.

Rejected and dejected, Craig slowly scuttled home, his claws dragging through the sand, his singing career over. He didn't think things could get any worse so you can imagine his embarrassment when he was stopped in his tracks by Pam.

"Hallelujah!" she sang with perfect pitch, "Hallelujah! And Sam shall reign for ever and ever!"

"Remember me, I'm Pam," she chirped merrily, "thanks for the tip about warming up in the anemone, I think it really worked. I hope I'm not late for the audition."

Craig realised what had happened. He had mistaken Pam for Sam. "What a fool I am," he thought to himself.

Opening night of the Humpback Messiah was spectacular. The ocean theatre was packed to the brim and the sardines were packed in like, well, sardines. Sam's performance was simply unforgettable. He brought the whole audience to tears. Ross the Wrasse had triumphed yet again.

Not only that, a new star was discovered that night! That's right, Pam the pitch perfect pilchard.

# Manipulator's Game

Moana Chujo  
Winner – Highly Commended  
Primary Story

Have you ever felt true fear? The sensation of feeling when your knees give out under you? The fear of knowing a murderer is with you? I can reassure you, that you don't know it like I do.

As the assistant to the best detective in Australia, there wasn't anything I'd never seen before. Dead bodies, manipulative culprits and crocodile tears, I'd seen it all. Except for one ending I would never have been prepared for.

It was when Detective Mini and I went to a hard interview room at the police station in Chatswood. "A devastating crime broke out recently, a pregnant mother named Lisa Deria. We have 2 people who were suspected to be the cause of the catastrophe." The suspects glanced our way. It was an important mission and failure could mean death for everyone breathing at this very moment.

Mini with her unfazed smile which could melt the coldest hearts but not these criminals. Teeth gritted, tears falling and the stench of lies. Mini was different. The personality and the looks of a happy toddler who believed paper stars could grant wishes, but inside that blank brain was the IQ worthy of a scholarship to Harvard.

"This is Leon Marsha, he was found near the body."

"Hello there Leon! I'm Mini and I'm here to ask you a question," Mini smiled, her golden retriever personality bouncing around the room and splitting the painfully scary tension. "Did you kill Lisa Deria?" Mini's eyes silently glared at Leon's quivering handsome soul.

Leon froze before frantically shaking his ginger head. "Of course n-n-not! Murder is i-i-illegal!" tears slid down Leon's red cheeks as he sobbed into his cuffed hands.

"Were you with the body?" Mini asked, her left hand fidgeting with her pen before clicking it non-stop. "...Y-yes but only because I was going home!" he confessed "I swear I couldn't see the body because it was so dark! I just happened to be there when the police came for the body!" his crying almost made me feel sympathy for the man, he shook violently like a washing machine as he sobbed continuously, his sobbing growing louder and louder the more Mini scribbled into her notebook.

"Alright then my good sir," Mini smiled "Thanks for your time, I'll be back with you in a minute." Mini's friendly smile probably reached Leon because he stopped bawling and only sniffled. He shivered slightly but I could see a hint of relief flood his scarlet face as I walked out of the interrogation room.

The next suspect was a tall woman with her shiny teeth cracked into a psychotic smile. Her eyes almost shook with insanity. Her long black hair snaked across the floor as if it might grab my ankles and pull me down. Our eyes met for only a second but at that very moment, her hypnotic eyes paralysed me. Even my legs were stiff and felt as if they were about to snap like ice on a spring branch.

I struggled to break out of my hallucination while Mini slowly edged closer. Even Mini must have noticed how terrifying this woman was. "Hello, what is your name?" Mini was confident but I swear I could hear a slight crack in her voice, the crack filled with uncertainty and fear.

"I'm Vanessa!" she laughed, her evil grin almost glitching into a frown. Mini opened her mouth to speak but Vanessa kicked her foot back and spun in her chair. "I know what you're going to ask me," her smile split into a smug smirk. "What if I did kill her? What are you going to do?" Mini glared, a faint smile remaining on her lips. "Did you?"

Vanessa spun around like a child. I had the tendency to punch her in the face but Mini held me back, Mini's calm demeanour switched to a bothered one, and I could even hear the annoyance in her voice. That was when I knew Mini wanted to punch Vanessa too.

"Well I mean, a pregnant woman with a flashy red dress at 11 in the night is bound to get shot no?" Vanessa laughed, she twirled a long strand of hair in her hand as she stared dead into my soul. It wasn't visible but I felt true fear for the first time since I went to watch the horror movies with Mini when we were both little kids.

I don't know what it was about Vanessa. Her terrifying voice? Her insane eyes? No, it's more than that. I knew the moment I saw her that she had murdered poor Lisa and her baby, a non-existent child who had no chance of living and experiencing the things I had done. Like the sensation of watching your morning channel while rushing to prepare for school. It made my blood boil.

Vanessa, I won't ever forgive you...

Mini glared at Vanessa her cold eyes scaring me more than Vanessa's presence could ever do. "How... how did you know she was wearing a red dress at 11 pm?" Mini's pursed lips slowly turned into a grin, a grin of satisfaction and victory. Vanessa stopped for a moment. Her breath hitched for a moment, she was caught.

Vanessa swung her head back, her scary laugh echoing and bouncing off the walls. "Ooh~ you got me~" she stood up and brushed some imaginary dust off her thighs. The very moment I blinked, Vanessa leapt onto Mini, a tiger on a lion.

"Too bad you'll be dead before you can tell anyone."

The sound of Mini choking was enough to jerk me back into reality. I tried to grab Vanessa's arms but one exhale and she kicked me back into a wall. I could feel warm blood slowly dripping off the top of my head. I felt myself slowly losing my grip on my consciousness. The last thing I saw was my sister's adoring navy eyes glancing my way before-

BANG! BANG! BANG!

I lost consciousness...

# *Arachne's Metamorphosis*

Esther Li

Winner – First Prize

Junior Secondary Story

Jing never leaves the palace. She is a work of art, draped in pale blue silks that flow like the Yangtze River and with hair down to her waist the colour of fine calligraphy ink. Her feet are broken. Bound. Under instruction by her father the emperor, the servants had wrapped them in tighter and tighter linens day by day until her bones were fractured and her feet were the size of lilies. Now she can barely walk, so instead she spends her days trapped within her room, with only blank space and a singular crack on the wall as her company.

"Father," Jing says one day. "Nothing keeps me company besides these blank walls and that singular crack of imperfection. I would like a loom, so that I may weave pictures to admire."

The emperor strokes the wispy sighs of his beard. When he had granted Jing's mother her wishes of sandalwood candles and a window to view the night sky, she had crafted wax wings and flown from the tower he had once sheltered her in, never to return. He will not make the same mistake again.

"No, my dear daughter," he says. "You cannot have a loom."

The next day, Jing asks again.

"Father," she says. "I would like a loom, so that I may weave pictures to admire."

The emperor looks at his daughter, with her doleful eyes glitering like the moon and her waning red lipped smile. The loom will be no harm, he reasons to himself, for she will not be able to use it to leave him the way the empress did.

"Very well then," he says at last. "You may have a loom."

He gives her a loom constructed out of thick bamboo planks, with silk interwoven with the thin heddles. Jing wastes no time and begins to weave. She depicts a pale bird with missing feet soaring across a blue sky, and even though uneven stitches traverse her work, she smiles regardless. Jagged hair erupts from her legs as she presses the pedals of her loom. She gets into a rhythm, lulled by the tuc tuc tuc sounds of bamboo heddles against white tile floors and the shining threads of blue, white, and grey she holds within her hands. When it is all done, she hangs the tapestry on her wall, thinking at first to cover that unsightly crack but then deciding against it. As Jing admires her handiwork, she reaches down and brushes her fingers over the newly grown thick, bristly strands of hair across her legs. Somehow, she likes the way it feels – different to porcelain expectations and glass vase smoothness.



The next day, Jing weaves an image of a phoenix with wax wings. Its feathers, dripping with ire, melt the glass tower it is kept within as it breaks free towards the limitless sun. Her work is incrementally better this time, with less mistakes and less uneven stitches. As she works lines of delicate crimson and gold silk with her hands, her fingers coalesce until her arm becomes one unified pedipalp, first her left arm and then her right. It does not slow her down – she is faster, in fact – unencumbered by painted nails and ornamental fingers bleached white like ivory.

When Jing is done with her tapestry, she does not sleep. She hangs her artwork on another wall – taking care not to cover that familiar crack of imperfection – and begins to weave again, this time of an owl with speckled wings unfurled and silvery eyes snapped open, grasping a full moon with its talons. Her work is almost flawless this time, save for one small imperfection on the edge of a broken feather. Jing closes her eyes momentarily and when she opens them again, she surveys the small room she resides in with a vast vision from six new silver eyes. With eight eyes rather than two, she now sees her surroundings for what they truly are: the lies, the confinement, the injustice. She displays the owl on her only spare wall left, all the while staring intently at that final white wall with its singular crack.

Jing weaves again. Her pedipalps work in sync with the loom, tendrils of thread drifting in and out to create an image of a pale blue spider crafting silk bridges until it reaches a seam in the white walls that confine it. Her work is perfect this time. Each obsidian stitch is flawless, smooth, beautiful. Spinnerets sprout from her back as she begins to shrink smaller, smaller, smaller and she crawls towards the crack in those accursed white walls until she finally slips through, leaving behind only a thin strand of silk in her wake.

She is free.

# Hide and Seek

Emma Devoy  
Winner – Second Prize  
Junior Secondary Story

Don't breathe too loud. Don't move your body. Don't let the fear take over you.  
They had to be close now.  
If I made any slight movement, they would see. And it would be over.

The leaves of the bush I was crouched behind tickled my cheeks, the slight wind blowing them around. I glanced down and could see that goosebumps ran down my arms. The breeze whispered in my ear, breathing down my neck.  
They had to be close now.  
I knew they wouldn't hesitate if they heard the slightest rustle, saw the slightest motion. My heart pounded, threatening to burst out of my chest. My brain taunted me, making my ears hear imaginary footsteps, making my eyes see illusions of shadows.  
They had to be close now.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for them to look around the bush, to see me.  
I opened my eyes. Closed them again. Opened them again.  
I was still alone.

Where was she?! My little sister was normally much quicker at hide and seek than this!  
My sister Charlotte and I had been engaging in a sort of hide and seek competition these holidays. I was focusing on the hiding aspect because Charlotte was best at finding.

I glanced down at the stopwatch on my phone. Two minutes. How was Charlotte taking more than two minutes to find me? She was better than that! Maybe she had gotten tired. To be honest, I kind of was too. The leaves touching my face felt more itchy than tickly now, and the wind was making me shiver.

I gave up waiting for my sister and stood up. I walked over to where she had been counting, brushing dirt off my pants.  
"Alright Charlotte, your turn to hide." I said, shaking my pants off. "Looks like your seeking streak has en-"  
I looked up. Charlotte wasn't there.  
At first I wasn't worried. She could be anywhere in the park. But as I looked around, I began to feel more panicked, because the state of my surroundings mimicked the feeling in my gut.  
Empty.

\*

Don't breathe too loud. Don't move your body. Don't let the fear take over you.  
How could this have escalated so quickly? I was just playing hide and seek with my older sister, she was hiding and I was seeking. Now I was the one hiding. But not from her. From the man that I could hear was getting closer and closer to me with every step.

This was the same man I saw when my older sister Bronte and I were walking to the park. He was in a grey van, and was driving down the road next to us. I didn't notice him until he drove into the cul de sac next to the park, a few seconds later than us. This could well have been a coincidence, so I didn't mention it to my sister. She worried about me too much anyway, but I could take care of myself.

However, at this moment, I wanted her help more than ever.

The man had approached me while I was playing hide and seek with Bronte. "Excuse me? Could you help me out? My dog just ran off, and I need somebody to help me find him!" he had said.

I knew that wasn't the case though. I could see by the way he walked, and by the tone of his voice that he was lying. He had seen us; two girls on their own, walking here, and had followed us. This could only mean one thing. I had run faster than I ever had away from him. He quickened his pace, still pretending, calling out "Oh, sorry, did I frighten you?" What normal person runs after a random kid? Sliding behind a tree, I tried to calm my desperate pants for air down. I couldn't outrun a grown man but I was great at hide and seek. The hiding part wasn't my speciality, but if my sister could do it, how hard could it be?

I could feel that my body was drenched in sweat as I pressed myself even harder against the tree. The bark dug into the palms of my hands, leaving painful scratches, but I didn't care. The only thing I was worrying about was staying silent and still.

My brain's warning signals were blaring all over the place, like that time at school when one of the students accidentally set off the fire alarm. I didn't know what would happen if this man found me, but I knew it wouldn't be good. The fear had paralysed me, and I realised I couldn't move, couldn't scream. Now I had no choice but to stay hidden.

I trembled as the sound of footsteps grew stronger, closer. He had to be close now. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the man to look around the tree, to see me.

A large thud suddenly sounded from behind me. My vocal chords finally unfroze and I let out a scream. What was happening? Had the man shot me? Was this the end?

I opened one eye. Nothing was hurting, but something was squeezing me. I couldn't breathe! I was choking, I was going to-

The squeezing suddenly stopped, and my sister stepped back from hugging me. I breathed out a huge sigh of relief, but I couldn't stop the tears from spilling out.

"We have to go before he wakes up!" Bronte cried, pulling me away and out of the park.

I looked back in surprise to see the man on the floor, knocked out cold, with a large rock next to his head. Had my sister done that?

I looked up at her and saw the fear and relief in my eyes reflected in hers. It looks like she wasn't such a bad seeker after all.

# *The Three of Us*

Violet Bloxson  
Winner – Highly Commended  
Junior Secondary Story

He just sits there. Staring. Always quiet.

He's frail. Fragile. Fading. A gentle summer's breeze would surely knock him off his feet. His hair is white. His skin is translucent. Delicate spectacles rest atop his slender nose. His velvet suit looks expensive, his spotted bow tie sharp and straight.

He appears to be content. Kind. But he never smiles.

He just sits there. Staring. Always quiet.

It's an old theatre. Red leather seats, once plush and vibrant, now sagging and dull. Ghost lights cast a warm glow across the empty stage, its tiring floorboards groan with many a story to tell. An aged piano, carved intricately from dark mahogany, rests alone in the empty orchestra pit, its yellowing keys begging to played once more. And there is a smell, a mix between salty popcorn, a dancer's perfume and, I can only describe it as, what 'old' smells like.

Some people say he's always there. In the back of the theatre, that is. Other people say they've never seen him. I've seen him. I look right at him and smile. But he never smiles. He just sits there. Staring. Always quiet.

Now everyone is looking for him. They're saying maybe he had something to do with the boy's disappearance.

It was late in the summer when the boy, only 5 years old, vanished. Literally vanished. Disappeared without a trace. The boy's mother had taken him to the theatre to see a play. She was distracted for just a moment getting him a popsicle and when she turned around her little boy was gone.

Someone reported seeing the boy walking off with a man in a velvet suit. Hand in hand. Casually strolling, like people do in the summer-time. Where would he take the boy, they asked. Why would he take the boy, they asked. And how could no one have noticed?

Another witness claims to have seen the boy with a woman. A woman a little younger than the man. Soft creamy skin. Wavy hair that shimmers and bounces about her shoulders. A floral dress that twirls gracefully as she dances. An iridescent pearl hanging from a fine chain around her elegant neck.

The theory goes that she kidnapped the boy because she desperately wanted a child. Something that was no longer possible for her. A plausible motive, I suppose.

Anyway, he's the prime suspect. Something more likely about a man kidnapping a child than a woman, right?

The theatre is closed now. A crime scene. The ornate wooden doors taped with signs that warn 'Do not enter'. The picture frames that held posters advertising the latest play or musical covered with eerily accurate police sketches of the man. They've searched every inch of the place, dusted every surface for fingerprints and placed every random item in plastic bags as 'evidence'.

I've been watching them. The police, that is. It's better than any performance I've seen in a long time. The thing is, though, they'll never find him. Or the boy for that matter. You see, I know what happened. But I can't tell you just yet.

"Did you just feel that?" asked one of the officers, "like a cool breeze? A waft?"

A tingle shot up his spine and goosebumps covered his arms.

"Hold on, I think I just heard something," he alerted the other officer, "like hurried footsteps, in that direction, and then a heavy thump."

He was pointing towards the back of the theatre, where the man liked to sit.

"Now I can smell something. I don't even know how to describe it. Delicate but unusual."

"What was that?"

"Do you get the sense that someone is watching us?"

Like I said, better than any show I've seen in a long time.

It's after dark now, the theatre is all locked up. It's cosy, like a cubby house. It's my cubby house.

He's just sitting there. Staring. Quiet.

She's backstage, her favourite place, swirling silently, practising pretend lines.

I can tell you one thing; neither of them had anything to do with the boy's disappearance.

How do I know? Because they look after me. Ever since that day I went missing. But I'm not ready to tell you what happened, maybe one day.

I wish my mum knew I wasn't alone. The three of us have each other. I know some people can see us but, of course, the thing about ghosts is that we literally disappear into thin air. Vague shadowy figures that evaporate like storm clouds. A flickering light that always goes out.

# *Painting of The Woman and the Flowers*

Emily Kim  
Winner – First Prize  
Senior Secondary Story

Gently brushing her hair into place, she practised her smiles to herself. She touched up the flower in their vase, smoothed down her skirt and positioned herself in her chair. Then she waited patiently for someone to come along and notice her.

And so they did.

Curious eyes stared at her, examining every inch of her body, burning into her flesh. They peered hungrily at everything within the 80 by 55 cm gold frame. She looked around nervously, heart thumping, a cold sweat beginning to form. She quickly dabbed it away with a handkerchief, acutely aware of the eyes that followed her every move and the mouths that turned up as they came aware of her fear.

As the days went by, she always did the same thing. She made sure she presented herself nicely, organised the flowers, smoothed down her skirt and sat down gently on the chair. And over time, her smile wavered as the curious eyes turned cold and calculative, critiquing her every move.

She would dream of being surrounded by stony eyes, staring at her. Words echoing around her in the dark, stabbing her heart with thousands of tiny swords, suffocating her, ringing in her ears till they bled. Then she'd wake up, trembling and shaking as she washed her face and got ready to face those eyes again.

Slowly, the crowd around her 80 by 55 cm gold frame grew smaller and smaller, she too felt herself grow smaller. Fear jolted her chest when someone would walk away and shame would burn her body down to her fingertips and toes when someone would make a comment. The laughter turned mean and harsh, every remark weighing her heart down, lower and lower, till no one came to her frame.

They would walk by, giving her a glance, then move on to the other paintings. Full of younger, prettier, skinnier, kinder looking girls, all smiling at the onlookers. Then eventually, people started to not even look at her. But eventually she started to wonder.

*Why are they judging me like that?*

*Why am I a painting on display for them to analyse?*

...

*Who do they think they are?*

Eventually, anger built up inside her. She started to stop caring about her hair, makeup and the way her skirt sat. The flowers beside her started wilting, then rotting and she stared back down in disdain at the people, instead of them staring at her. She started to respond back, fighting their insults with her own, fighting fire with fire, swords with swords.

But people hate things they can't control and eventually a little tape fence was made around her with a white sign reading:

*FRAGILE  
SOON TO BE REPLACED*

So the day came, two workers prying the 80 by 55 cm gold frame off the wall and carrying her away. Her vase tipped, rotten flowers spilling out. She swore and screamed, cursing everyone who stood and watched her, eyes sparkling with a smug look almost saying:

*I told you so.*

The two workers came back with a different painting, a 70 by 60 cm wooden frame, with a nervous girl inside. Long blonde hair and short dress, sitting by a lake. The curious eyes followed her and like moths to a flame, walked over and started examining her, forgetting all about the woman and the flowers that were there before.

# Brotherhood

Ruby Burke  
Winner – Second Prize  
Senior Secondary Story

The night is thick and black, choking the silhouette of the Soldier who shovels a pile of upheaved mud back into the ground. The trench is eerily quiet compared to earlier that day, and the Soldier cannot tell if it's the chilling wind slithering underneath his uniform or screams echoing in his mind that makes his hairs stand on end. Pain rips through his shoulder with every heave, each new coat of mud burying the body deeper.

~

The sun was a golden jewel hanging in the cobalt blue sky, pouring warmth over the crowd of boys around the stage. They were packed like sardines, elbows and shoulders prodding the Soldier as he tried to get a better look at the Leader, whose neatly pressed shirt sported an array of golden medals, harnessing the sunlight. He smiled.

"Young men, we are all Brothers under our mighty country."

Murmurs of agreement wafted through the crowd. They fell silent as the Leader's smile dropped.

"However, I warn you, there is a dark and heartless evil that lurks, threatening our Brotherhood. He is known as the Enemy."

A patch of clouds blocked out the sun, casting a shadow over the Leader's face. The crowd exchanged whispers. The Soldier shot his best friend Henry, who was standing metres away, a fearful glance. Henry's eyes were trained on the Leader.

"The Enemy will stop at nothing to destroy our beloved country and tear us to the ground. We must fight back!"

The Soldier's heart rose into his throat. The clouds passed and the sun flooded them with light.

"Men, how far would you go to defend your Brother? Would you march out onto the battlefield? Would you offer your life?"

The Soldier felt his head nodding. Yes, in a heartbeat.

"So join us!" the Leader shouted. "Protect our Brotherhood and our mighty country. Earn glory and honour beyond measure. Defeat the tyrants once and for all!"

The crowd erupted into triumphant shouts. Men waved their fists in the air and stomped their feet. Liquid gold bubbled inside of the Soldier. He turned to Henry, who flashed him a knowing grin.

Defend the Brotherhood. Defeat the Enemy.

It was cold in the muddy trenches; colder than what the Soldier had anticipated. An overcast sky sealed them in, the wind stinging their skin.

"Stay low, soldiers!" The General yelled. "The Enemy will attack fiercely. They are inhuman; their hearts are stone."

Henry, who was crouched next to the Soldier, nudged him.

"Reckon we'll earn one of those?"

He pointed to the General, whose row of golden medals somehow shimmered against the dull landscape.

"A bravery medal?" The Soldier's mind went back to the box of medals that the General kept at camp, his keen eye searching for the next recipient. He turned back to Henry, whose eyes glistened in what was left of the pale sun.



"Yeah. For protecting our country, our friends, our families. The Brotherhood."

The Soldier peered out across the trenches. The Enemy would arrive tomorrow, they predicted. His heart fluttered at the idea of firing out into Enemy lines; defeating those heartless monsters.

He replied, "I'm sure we will, once we claim victory."

Henry grinned and slapped him on the back. "Show no mercy."

The early morning sun cracked across the sky, setting it alight. Warmth pumped through the Soldier's veins as they marched towards the trenches. He stuck close to Henry's side.

Bullets pelted like rain. Slipping on mud, heart scrambling, water filling eyes. The Soldier ducked into a trench, hit with a horrifying stench. His boot kicked something fleshy and limp. Screams rang out louder than gunfire. Much louder. Where was Henry?

An explosion rocked the ground. The Soldier ducked. Debris sailed through the air. He scrambled up, blinded by black smoke, people running, crawling, dropping to the ground. He tried to shout, but the smoke forced its way into his lungs, making his words nothing but a whisper:

"Henry, where are you?"

He raised his gun and pushed forward. Must keep going. Must-

An Enemy stood metres from him, gun raised. The Soldier's heart stopped. The world went silent.

He thought that the Enemy would scowl or spit or curse.

But he didn't. He simply stood there.

Both their uniforms were caked in mud. Their faces were scratched. Their hands were trembling. It was like staring at a mirror.

So it hardly came as a shock when the Soldier clamped down on the trigger and found that the Enemy's heart wasn't stone, but was the same as his, blood gushing out onto the muddy ground.

~

The Soldier lets go of the shovel, sending it tumbling down. He sucks icy air into his lungs and peers out across the black landscape, where lost Brothers and Enemies alike lie in the same trenches. The remaining soldiers all retreated back to their camps for the night. All except for him.

Henry lies among the dead, somewhere. The Enemy, whose life the Soldier stole from a mother, wife, friend - lies in the shallow grave, protected from stomping feet and bullets. If he cannot put the blood back inside his heart, this is the next best thing.

He pulls Henry's bravery medal out of his pocket, turning it over in his hands. He accepted it from the General on his best friend's behalf, for his sacrifice. It is cold and caked in mud, not a hint of golden shimmer to be found.

The Soldier drops the medal on top of the grave and steps back, bowing his head. He hears the voice of the Leader creeping into his ears like venom:

"He is not your Brother. Why do you have mercy on him?"

*He is not my Brother.*

*But he is someone's.*

# 12:35, It's Lunchtime

Chloe Leung  
Winner – Highly Commended  
Senior Secondary Story

It's not that you don't like eating lunch.

You used to eat plain rice for lunch, packed in your Hello Kitty thermos that you carried in your school bag, and you'd get a kick of elation with every spoonful of steaming white goodness. You loved rice so much that you ate it everyday for five years straight. "Aren't you sick of it?" your friends would ask. Logically, you should've been. But no, you never were.

Perhaps it was its innocuous, simple appearance that didn't make you queasy, the scent so subtle that it never overwhelmed your senses. Perhaps it was the slight sweetness that only you could taste, despite everyone claiming that rice is flavourless. Perhaps it was because you knew that your father woke up early to prepare your lunch for you, sometimes adding a few pieces of *lap cheong* to add a little bit of saltiness and joy to your afternoon.

But when you started highschool, you told your father to stop making your lunches, that you would buy your own at the canteen, that your lunchbox was too heavy and too bulky to fit in your school bag. A young, small and naive twelve year old, you didn't understand the concept of 'bringing only what you need', and had seven workbooks in your bag at all times. Of course you couldn't fit that pink thermos in there. And so, you moved on to canteen meals.

Your school canteen had great food, and still does: pasta, beef bulgogi, sheng jian bao, and even laksa. You embraced the colour and the variety, always waiting for the liberating ring of the lunch bell at 12:35 just to get to the canteen as quickly as possible.

"You mustn't ever skip lunch," your mother tells you all the time, "or else, you'll become very ill." You had obeyed, not because you understood what 'very ill' meant, but because you liked eating lunch. Life was straightforward and easy. You studied, you played, you ate, you slept, repeat.

Then, at fifteen, came the apocalypse.

You didn't know that the end of the world was coming until the floor shattered beneath your feet, and you were left with invisible wounds that continued to bleed long after you picked yourself up. It took you a while to remember that the sky used to be blue, not grey; that your bed used to be comforting, not a coffin; that the things you now gaze upon indifferently used to bring you excitement and delight.

Who knows what happened to you, really. Things were never so dull and ugly before the world ended and hastily pieced itself back together. You remember looking at yourself in the mirror, and wondering quietly: since when had you been so unsightly?

It's not that you don't like eating lunch. But after the apocalypse, exhaustion seems to hang off your bones. You fail to leave your bed some days, echoes of the world's end haunting your mind. As you let everything slip, so did lunchtimes.

It started off as a one-off; you were too tired to go to the canteen, so you didn't. Then you were 'too tired' again and again, and you began to forget about having lunch. And soon, you stopped trying, even when hunger gnawed at your stomach, because despite the discomfort, the reflection in your mirror became more bearable.

Now, you've forgotten what hunger feels like; all you feel is starvation, telling you to either eat or die. When you try to eat lunch, you smell the stench of seasoning and feel sick.

Your mother still tells you every so often to never skip lunch. You still don't know what kind of illness she warns of, but maybe you have it; maybe you are ill.

One day, you're home alone, and you sit in front of your mirror and stare into your eyes. You've always been told that your eyes are a darker brown than most others; almost black, even. The darkness of your iris blends with your pupil, and your eyes become a deep void that slowly wells with tears. You can never lie to yourself for too long; you know that you have never attempted to recover from the apocalypse, that you had given up before even trying, and that all you do is lie and deny. Alone, you scream to the silence, cursing the 'you' who is eternally weary, mourning the 'you' who did not care about appearances, hating the 'you' who can only cry in front of a mirror.

Unexpectedly, you feel hunger, too.

It isn't starvation; you don't feel like you're at your limit. You crave food. A warm, light meal.

You find yourself longing for a small thermos of steaming hot rice, with eight small pieces of *lap cheong*.

Just like how people get sick of eating the same thing over and over again, you're sick of not eating lunch. You could almost laugh at that notion; isn't it strange how everything seems to come back to food, whether you like it or not?

In the end, you don't eat rice for lunch the next day. Even with just the school essentials, your bag is unable to fit a thermos inside it, and you have no idea how you managed it at age thirteen.

Instead, you watch the clock that sits above the whiteboard in your classroom. There are five minutes left until 12:35. You don't know what you want to buy; it's been a while, after all. But you'll figure it out when you go to the canteen, since you promised yourself to eat lunch today. The thought of it, admittedly, still makes your stomach churn and your lungs constrict.

But this is something that you must do. Your mother told you to never skip lunch, didn't she?

The bell rings. Your teacher smiles, and says, "12:35, it's lunchtime!"





# Winning Entries

A collection of award winning  
poems from the 2024 Mosman  
Youth Awards in Literature

# *The Beef Procedure*

Ariel Spencer  
Winner – First Prize  
Junior Secondary Poetry

A leisurely haze surrounds the expanse of green  
Murmurs sweeping through the serene,  
Dawn's drapes extended, fashioning long shadows  
Swarms of black and brown, crowd the plateaus  
One is chosen, their disappearance unchallenged  
Taken away to a truck, sent to be packaged.

On the conveyor belt ride  
The first drop is a bolt to the heart,  
Unzipped skin, reveals purple lungs  
Roughly hewn hooves,  
Echo against the floor,  
Gloves scabble for the gory prize,  
Rib eye and tenderloin cleaved lie  
packed in a plastic coffin.

Neon signs flick, over crackling speakers  
Heavy weight patrons spit out orders like preachers  
Underpaid hands throw flesh to the fire  
Smouldering on the blistering pyre,  
Gnashing teeth, pulverising is rife  
Is this your celebration of life?

# *Hourglass*

Katherine McDiarmid  
Winner – Second Prize  
Junior Secondary Poetry

Granules of sand,  
Slipping through my hands,  
Through the cracks.  
A mound is building at the bottom.

I think about my past sometimes,  
Of who I used to be.  
I think about what the world has become,  
Who I am now.  
Sand keeps falling.

I look at photos of my childhood sometimes.  
Of how I used to be.  
I think of the people my parents used to be.  
I think.  
The mound is growing at the bottom.

I imagine things about my future sometimes.  
About who I might be.  
Of people I might meet.  
Things I might achieve.  
The sand is evening out.

I think about what will happen when I'm old.  
About my children.  
About my family.  
My life.  
The sand is almost gone.

I picture my death,  
People at the funeral.  
I won't be there anymore.  
Nonexistent.  
The last granule slips out onto the other side.  
Then the hourglass is flipped.  
And the cycle repeats.

# *Infinity string*

Ariel Bai

Winner – Highly Commended  
Junior Secondary Poetry

We are all born containing a roll of wool  
Soundlessly, mine intertwined with yours  
My other half  
Merged and fused  
Not on a leash nor a chain  
A delicate soft lace  
So no matter where we are  
Among elliptical galaxies or hefty bodies of water  
You can always follow back to me

While most days, we place it under our arms  
Invisible and unseen  
At times it needs some amends  
Perhaps trims and snips here and there  
As we gently stream our fingers through the knots  
Detangling, unravelling bit by bit

Curling and threading one over the other  
Together, we weave a woollen blanket  
Enveloping us in its ever-warm embrace  
We sit shoulder to shoulder, palms enclosed  
Soaking up the solace

Our thread reaches over the equator  
Further beyond the horizon  
Floating on top of the Pacific Ocean  
Flying via intangible clouds  
In between silent, serene areas of void  
In between bustling cities and crowds

It may change hue, form, or lose the original grip  
But it is always apparent  
Leaning among every nook and cranny  
And I will gently

trace it back  
to you





# New Year's Eve

Maya Le Her  
Winner – First Prize  
Senior Secondary Poetry

*After Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004)*

I called you at ten o'clock, in the impermeable space  
Between firework displays. My throat  
Felt as though it burned with words restrained.  
You asked if I wanted to go for a walk.

Footsteps on the pavement, my heel boots  
Criss-crossing as I leaned into you. As tall  
as you, for once. I remember you held me  
In your gaze as I raged, until my fires burned cool.

We parted again at my place. You felt safe,  
Walking home on a night when everyone  
Doused themselves in sequins and goodwill.  
*Happy New Year, Happy New Year.*

A message from you at eleven –  
*I'm watching the film you recommended  
about memory erasure.*  
I pressed play on my own screen,

three streets away. Separated by timestamps  
And your aversion to texting. Still, a thread -  
Audiovisual, brightly coloured, calling myself  
Your Clementine. *Oh, my darling...*

We were unpretentiously in love  
With arthouse films by French directors,  
Sending each other jokes as it played.  
We must have been halfway, when I paused

To watch the firework display. My throat  
Still ached with something like an afterburn,  
But when you wrote *Happy New Year*  
I found myself in a sunshine that felt eternal.

# *Day in the life of a universe*

Kara Wong  
Winner – Second Prize  
Senior Secondary Poetry

.  
-  
Once  
The remains  
Of a universe  
Woke up from its  
long eternal slumber,  
God said, "Let there be light"  
And so, there was light amidst  
A barren existence. Incompleteness  
and so birthed the fecundity of creation-  
At some point humanity took its first steps  
And went to work. We sought for achievement  
To escape the inevitable abyss, a star in the distance  
Hopeless meandering until we reach the door to infinity.  
All the while aware that Thanatos had sent a silent asteroid  
Coming and arrived at the end of time; and with enough seconds  
Nothing will matter. some will look in the face of the cosmos and cry  
will i ever be good enough will i ever be good enough will i ever be a god?  
Yet all I'll be able to say to you is, "Please have a rest, .. / .-. --- ..- . / -:- --- .."  
Homo Sapien. To be the ever only animal conscious of the universe's bedtime  
And to still live in a state of constant ignorance of the fact that for 80 years,  
Matter even knew it was matter at all. if one is too cautious about pursuing  
an unusual path: your failures will be forgotten just as the cynics likewise-  
one day we'll disappear, and the ones remembering us will be gone as well  
Maybe tomorrow, we'll have two lifetimes, and kill death with two hands  
But not now. I am tired. Walk past the bustling traffic and vineyards  
The big dipper bows its goodbyes and Antares nods off to sleep-  
The Milky Way and Andromeda collide in a romantic embrace  
finally, the mayfly arrives gently on the surface of a lake  
If nothing truly matters, would that even matter at all?  
The universe rests again in limitless, perpetual dark  
To appreciate the simple nature of being alive,  
The interminable rise and fall of generations  
How many of us were here since dawn?  
Lying in bed, I dream about what a  
weird honour it is to be human  
And what an awful decision  
It would be to waste the  
precious moments  
Matter woke up  
Amidst the  
fleeting  
light.  
-  
.

# *birdman*

Esther Schroeter  
Winner – Highly Commended  
Senior Secondary Poetry

*My oma smells like cigarettes  
thick floral perfume, and old clothes*

A world away, from the bus stop across the road  
I smell her when I see the man at the bench

Perched against the hardwood  
a 9-5 slouch,  
Hollow eyes and a greying beard  
a hard marlborough between his lips  
Perhaps a chesterfield

*Oma kept her cigarettes in a tortoiseshell case, I don't know the brand  
But I know the bitter sweet aroma*

The man trips on my stare  
He peers back  
cautious of my judgemental gaze.  
He breathes out and I lose his features  
I draw him a face instead  
Beaked nose  
glossy eyes and thick brows  
sooty hair, timid with signs of ageing.

The man in the suit breathes in again

The smoke remains, so I peer at his legs instead  
Long, thin; worn from a corporate day  
A gnarled hand hugs the cig,  
and hangs loose at his thighs  
Burl'd twisted knuckles clutch at it like it's trying to escape

A car passes,  
an F430 Ferrari blazes pass,  
I'm tempted to look at its wake  
but the smoulder between us settles  
The Birdman seems disgruntled too  
*My Oma coughs when she smokes  
trying to expel the addiction*

He breathes in  
Breathes out  
in and out  
in and out  
It's a part of him,  
he doesn't choke on his being

I wonder if his lungs are grey  
If his heart lurches when he walks too hard  
If the nails lining his claws are stained yellow  
If his gums swell

Clasped between pointer and thumb  
He teases his soul,  
with death in his teeth  
sucking away at the eternal

His exhale is darker this time  
oxford-grey consumes him.  
Shapes emerge from the plume,  
the ash settles on his arms, face, hair

Charcoal nestles in newfound wrinkles  
coating his business class  
His nose covers his lips,  
lifeblood smoke has pooled in his eyes

*On hot summer nights,  
When crickets dance in the garden  
My Oma sits beneath the glowing moon  
And sings along to her clicking lighter*

The man shifts,  
talons rake on the footpath.  
I can hear them over the bustling motorway.  
He stands from the bench and with it  
his arm sweeps across his body to his face,  
leaving distaste in the air beneath him.

*continues on next page*

He looks at me again  
black pupils careen through the traffic  
His head tilts sideways  
and his raven hair gleams in the sunlight

The bus halts,  
suddenly in front of me  
I walk, tapping through the aisle to the back  
Lay my head against the window,  
my vision blurs from the shaking vehicle

The avian man opens his beak,  
with an intense drag on his cigarette, he ruffles up.  
Glorious wings pull him above the city

The bus drifts away,  
and the crow soars over the street  
Trailing high above the bus,  
until he scrapes the edges of heaven

*My Oma should stop smoking  
before she grows wings too*





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