



Sutherland Shire
LITERARY
COMPETITION
2026

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MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

Writing has a unique capacity to capture moments, question assumptions and give form to experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken. The Sutherland Shire Literary Competition exists to create space for stories, ideas and voices to be explored with care and intent.

Now well established, the competition has become an enduring part of the Sutherland Shire's cultural calendar. What began as a local initiative has grown into a nationally recognised platform, drawing together writers from across Australia who share a commitment to craft and a belief in the importance of literature as a means of connection and expression.

The breadth of entries received each year reflects the diversity of those who choose to participate and the many ways writing continues to resonate in contemporary life. From emerging writers finding their voice to more experienced authors refining their practice, the competition supports a wide range of creative approaches and perspectives.

Central to the integrity of the competition is the role of the independent judges; Barry Collier OAM, Tom Croucher and Michael Forshaw, whose professional knowledge and thoughtful insights underpin the assessment process. Their engagement ensures that each submission is given close consideration and that entrants benefit from a process grounded in respect for the discipline of writing.

I congratulate each writer who submitted their work to this year's Sutherland Shire Literary Competition, and thank them for contributing their ideas, stories and voices. I also want to acknowledge the Council teams responsible for coordinating and supporting the competition. Their commitment plays a vital role in ensuring this longstanding initiative continues to thrive.

This year's collection of entries stands as another testament to the power of the written word and to the ongoing relevance of literature within the Sutherland Shire and beyond.

Jack Boyd
Mayor
Sutherland Shire Councilor

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Sutherland Shire Literary Competition Publication

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LIST OF WINNERS

TRADITIONAL VERSE		
Prize Winners		
First Prize	A Step Too Far - Terrence Piggott, Lynwood WA	
Highly Commended	The Girl with the Flute - Karyn Savage, Warabrook NSW	
Shire Resident’s Prize	The Leaves in Grandma’s Garden - Emily Cook, Bangor NSW	
Commended	A Land Down Under - David Judge, Kangaroo Flat VIC	
Commended	Love, Like a Mountain - David Stanley, Bathurst NSW	
Commended	The Local Pool’s Rhythm - Rebecca Molendowski, Kirrawee NSW	
Commended	The Stranger - Jim Gill, Sawtell NSW	
FREE VERSE		
Prize Winners		
First Prize	Gone. Here. Both - Kevti Desai, Epping VIC	
Highly Commended	Full Circle - Susanna Elliott-Newth, Woonona NSW	
Shire Resident’s Prize	Broken Toy - Mann Irin Mian, Sylvania Waters NSW	
Commended	Afterwards - Helen Lyne, Balgowlah NSW	
Commended	Marram Grass - Stephanie Green, Southport QLD	
Commended	Sunset at Cronulla - Tamara Stanley, Caringbah NSW	
Commended	WOOLWORTHS BAGS - Sara Pronger, Ulladulla NSW	
SHORT STORIES		
Prize Winners		
First Prize	Empty Arms - Irene Sheehan, Thirroul NSW	
Highly Commended	Adequate Compensation - Carmel M Lillis, Yarraville VIC	
Shire Resident’s Prize	The Carline - Kathleen Blythe, Como NSW	
Commended	Blaze - Riley Buchanan, Heathcote NSW	
Commended	More than enough - Julie McNamara, Moolap VIC	
Commended	Paradise - Stephen House, Brooklyn Park SA	
Commended	The Perfect Imperfect Candidate - Karina McDougall, Blakehurst NSW	
Commended	The Rock Collector - Pamela Murray-Jones, Illawong NSW	
Commended	The Winning Catch - Dot Stute, Kenmore Hills QLD	
Commended	The Wonnies - Terry O’Riordan, Woollooware NSW	
Commended	This Stranger - Kathy Van de Straat, Sutherland NSW	

JUDGES' REPORT

Thank you for the opportunity to judge 2025-26 Sutherland Shire Literary Competition, a task we have found both challenging and rewarding.

At first sight, the task of judging 539 entries from across Australia and deciding three prize winners in each of three sections appeared to be overwhelming. But in reading the multitude of entries we were rewarded with a valuable insight into the complexity of contemporary life and the issues facing Australians and their families in the 2020's.



Judges (l-r) Michael Forshaw, Barry Collier OAM, and Tom Croucher.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

In both the poetry and short story sections, entrants generally combined originality and mature reflection across an extraordinarily broad landscape of themes, ideas and emotions. These included the joys and heartaches of love, the realities of ageing, bushfires and environmental threats, the grief and tragedy of unexpected loss and the scourge of family violence.

Overall, the standard of entries in both the poetry and short stories sections was strong, reflecting a high level of literacy and expression. With very little separating outstanding entries from one another in each category, the task of choosing between the prize-winning entries and those receiving our commendations was a difficult one indeed.

It is always good practice to check each entry for potential spelling and punctuation errors. While these do not necessarily devalue your work, they do have a tendency to distract the reader from its flow and its intended message.

TRADITIONAL (RHYMING) VERSE (116 ENTRIES)

The better entries in this section combined vivid and meaningful images with a constant structure and a consistent rhyming scheme.

The opening lines of these poems drew in the reader immediately while their closing lines left that same reader with at least one memorable “take-away”- be it an unforgettable image or message that flows from the words leading up to it and has left the reader thinking about it afterwards.

The language in the best poems was precise, without clichés and relevant to the poem's underlying theme. Its use was also economical from the first line onwards, with each verse logically contributing something meaningful to the intended message at the end.

The rhyming added to the poem's strength and was consistently clear, natural and “unforced” without inappropriate and ‘near-rhymes.’ It is always worth reading your rhyming verse out loud to yourself (or another person) and asking does the poem have a regular, beat to it? Does it sound smooth and natural or does it sound as though the author has used some words “just to make it rhyme?”

FREE VERSE (209 ENTRIES)

While not requiring any particular form or structure, good free verse must, as a minimum, meet the same basic requirements as good traditional verse.

Accordingly, the better entries here immediately engaged the reader's attention and went on to focus

clearly upon a particular circumstance, theme, idea or emotion. Using precise language, an economy of words and vivid imagery, the best entries went on to increasingly breathe life into their focus area, flowing on to deliver a powerful (and, at times subtle) ending.

Several entries employed literary devices including internal rhyme, personification and repetition to enhance their poems, while some of the best poems effectively used the technique of enjambment - the continuation of one line of poetry into the next without punctuation - to create tension, surprise or a sense of rising emotion.

A number of entrants used random line-breaks which made their poem appear like a short story broken into bits. This, along with the use of clichés, obvious inferences, common phrases and at times, socially inappropriate language, only served to detract from their quality. It's also worth reading your free verse entry out loud to make sure it doesn't sound like a “chopped up” short story, entered in the wrong competition section.

SHORT STORY (214 ENTRIES)

In this category, more than any other, entrants generally took the opportunity to write about the realities of contemporary Australian life, drawing on their experience across a very wide range of themes, ideas and emotions. Many courageously presented their own stories of deeply personal circumstances and very challenging issues, which now confront them or which they and their families faced in the past.

The better entries quickly pulled the reader in with their first few lines and focussed on one main idea, circumstance, emotional issue or conflict. They developed their stories using a combination of vivid description and realistic dialogue between central characters which not only kept the readers thinking throughout but anticipating the final outcome. The best stories often ended with a twist, surprising or memorable outcome which resonated with the reader.

The weaker entries did not fully develop a central theme, idea or issue and simply went off the track. A number started off very well but appeared to ‘run out of steam,’ ending their stories far too quickly. Several entries read more like a newspaper report than a true short story. The takeaway here is that the very best short stories take time, thought and effort to develop and write.

TO ALL 2025-26 ENTRANTS

We congratulate you and we thank you for the contribution you made to this year's Competition. We trust you found the experience of putting your thoughts, issues, experiences, dreams and aspirations down on paper just as rewarding as we, the Judges, did in reading about them.

Above all, we encourage all of you to continue writing and developing your literary skills with a view to entering the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition next time around.

ABOUT THE 2025-26 JUDGES

Barry Collier OAM is a published poet, author and practising barrister. He is a former NSW State MP for Miranda, Sutherland Shire Councillor and high school Head Teacher. His books include *Poems of Life, Of Love and Passing*, his political memoir *Collier for Miranda: the 1999 Labor Campaign* and his best-selling HSC textbook series *Introducing Economics*. In 2017, Barry was awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) ‘for service to the Parliament of New South Wales, to the law and to education.’

Tom Croucher was a High School Mathematics teacher before changing careers to become a Software Engineer. He served for 9 years as an elected Councillor on Sutherland Shire Council, including two terms as Deputy Mayor. He has published 3 books and now spends much of his time researching and writing, mainly on Biblical Exegesis.

Michael Forshaw is a former Senator for NSW and Sutherland Shire Deputy Mayor and Councillor. Michael graduated from Sydney University with an Honours Degree in English, American and Australian Literature. He is also a Barrister with a Law Degree from the University of NSW. He has contributed to publications on Australian politics and international relations. Michael is an avid reader.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



A STEP TOO FAR

Terry Piggott

Lynwood WA

JUDGES' COMMENT

An excellent bush ballad, vividly depicting the story of a lone prospector roaming in the Outback for 60 years who passes away soon after he (unwillingly) leaves behind his freedom and independence to live in town. The poem maintains a strong, consistent rhyming and rhythm scheme throughout. A distinguishing feature here is the clever internal rhyming in the first and third lines of each verse.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

Thanks for the good news of winning The Sutherland Shire Literary Traditional Verse Competition. A very pleasant surprise especially since it was my birthday yesterday.

The poem is based loosely on a true story that took place some years ago. The old bloke that the poem is about lived in an old, corrugated shack. And had been out bush for many years in a remote area, about 160 kilometres from the nearest town.

I was a prospector myself and knew him well for a number of years. The poem pretty well tells his story. He was a marvellous old character.

As his old camp starts to crumble ghostly voices
seem to mumble,
in the rattle and the moans of tortured metal in the
breeze.

As it stands there sad and battered, there are parts
of it now scattered
all around the hillside, leaving little left there now to
please.

And it's hard to hide the sadness for what seemed
to me like madness,
when the old chap was coerced to leave and go
and live in town.

Good intentions - but shortsighted - and perhaps
the plan was blighted,
for he only lived a few months - and he never
settled down.

After all those years of knowing just exactly where
life's going,
to be suddenly uprooted from the lifestyle he knew
well.

Surely was at best misguided when those plans had
been decided
and I doubt old Jim had much input, although it's
hard to tell.

With the sun now slowly setting once again I'm left
regretting,
at the way he'd been enticed to up and leave his
old bush home.

I still see him yarning joking sitting by his campfire
smoking,
overlooking there the vastness that he daily used to
roam.

Though his camp was old and battered, it was
home and that's what mattered,
life out bush had suited him, for there, you really
can be free.

And with early shadows falling, I now find myself
recalling,
sitting with him round his campfire yarning with
a mug of tea.

So, forget the old camp's roughness, it was
planned and built for toughness,
to withstand the arid harshness that is always
found out there.

And despite Jim's mild appearance he had grit
and perseverance
and could face up to the worst of it found there
or anywhere.

And the heat was unrelenting leaving most of us
lamenting,
yet for sixty years he lived there uncomplaining
till the end.

Though the weather's irritating, Jim would
always be there waiting,
with a near cold beer or two, to welcome any
passing friend.

But his first love was prospecting, and he'd walk
for miles collecting,
quartz like specimens, he hoped would lead him
to a worthwhile find.

I can see him out there strolling over country
rough and rolling,
picking up each thing of promise leaving blokes
like me behind.

I remember our first meeting and his friendly
smile and greeting,
out there near the Coronation on a warm day
years ago.

There were old mines he'd been checking, in
between a bit of specking,
for rich specimens were sometimes found
below the big quartz blow.

Soon he had a campfire going then the stories
started flowing,
telling yarns of prospecting and life out bush
there long ago.

And from that day on I reckon lasting friendship
seemed to beckon
and I'd call into his camp when passing, just to
say hello.

And the kettle would be boiling, while old Jim
was out there toiling,
crushing specimens collected way out where
the eagles fly.

So, the Dolly would be ringing and the kettle
also singing,
as I called in for a cuppa and a chat while
passing by.

But those days are gone forever out there in the
Never Never,
where those old blokes helped to weave the
stirring stories of our past.

And the dreams that they were chasing we are
slowly now erasing,
for the old time Aussies all but gone - with
blokes like Jim the last.

TRADITIONAL VERSE

HIGHLY
COMMENDED

THE GIRL WITH THE FLUTE

Karyn Savage
Warabrook NSW

JUDGES' COMMENT

A classic romantic setting: a girl lamenting her lost love atop the wild, windswept Cliffs of Moher on Ireland's west coast. Her mournful tune parallels the surging sea and strong winds, changing from feelings of abandonment to the determination of a new life back in Australia. With excellent use of language, imagery and repetition of 'the girl with the flute' this poem evokes mixed emotions of loss, grief, desire and hope.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

Thank you so much! I am over the moon. Thank you to the judges, organisers and the whole team involved in running such a valuable competition.

Silence, rejections, rewrites, and doubts become so familiar to a writer. I took a risk, and in this instance, the pure delight of receiving a Highly Commended in the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition is the fuel in my fire to continue creating. I am beyond thankful for this incredible recognition and validation of my poem.

Upon rugged cliffs with wind-whipped hair,
she took to her lips a silvered prayer.
From deep in her soul, a mournful strain
arose with the wind and wave's refrain.
The girl with the flute and homespun skirt
entwined into song, her sea of hurt.

A tempest within, and surge below,
both tussled and tossed in endless flow,
unleashed on the breeze, her tune took flight
and soared over Moher's lofty height.
The girl with the flute and downcast gaze
entrusted her burdens to the haze.

With strength in its wings, a red kite sailed,
a glimmer of light, when all had failed.
A flourish of notes, a change of key,
abandoning dreams; not meant to be.
The girl with the flute and sage-green eyes
now shifted her pose and searched the skies.

Ahead, she would forge her life anew.
Return to her home where gum trees grew.
In time, she'd forget; recall no more,
those sweetest encounters by the shore.
The girl with the flute, her tears now spent,
resolved the last notes of her lament.

A seafarer lured by oceans' wiles,
at whim of the waves from ports to isles,
secured like the rigging, bound as rope,
he left without word, her heart lost hope.
To the girl with the flute, on cliff tops high,
"Forgive me," ... his whisper floated by.

TRADITIONAL VERSE

SHIRE
RESIDENT'S
PRIZE

THE LEAVES IN GRANDMA'S GARDEN

Emily Cook
Bangor NSW

JUDGES' COMMENT

A neatly structured poem about the ongoing positive impact of a precious, much-loved grandmother after her passing. Imagery and metaphor transform the falling leaves into wonderful and sustained memories of her by her grandchildren: her warmth, her songs, her smiles, her hugs and even her cups of tea. A loving tribute to a very special person.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

There are not enough adjectives in the dictionary to express the depth of my gratitude and delight at receiving this prestigious honour. This is the first time I've ever entered a poetry writing competition, so to be acknowledged amongst such a distinguished field of fellow creatives gives me goosebumps!

I'm an aspiring picture book author who lives on Dharawal Country – a land that has nurtured and inspired me for most of my life.

It was under a jacaranda tree that the kernel of The Leaves in Grandma's Garden first sprouted. My beautiful Grandma, Maureen, had recently been diagnosed with dementia, and watching the purple flowers drift and soar seemed a perfect metaphor for trying to explain this unfathomable illness with my three young children.

I hope this work brings comfort to anyone dealing with memory loss. It gives readers gentle permission to wrap themselves in the glow of precious memories spent with their loved one, as a shield against the sorrow dementia brings.

The leaves in Grandma's garden
Are dropping one by one
We watch them drift like raindrops
As they fade with setting sun.

We rake them up around us
Learn every crease and crack
The tree is very old now
We know they won't grow back.

We scoop them up like gemstones
Yellow brown and red
Mum says those leaves are like the thoughts
That leave from Grandma's head.

Her eyes still crinkle just the same
Perched in her favourite chair
Yet leaves whip by in winter's wind
She slips away somewhere.

Words lost their faith, rang hollow
A leaf fell and then some more
Missed signs and silly mix-ups
Pull-string phrase and unlocked door.

Her branch is almost empty
The buds no longer sprout
But we splay our hands in soil
Meld truths to whispered doubt.

Her songs, her smiles, her cups of tea
Have raised our seeds to roots
Her sunlit hugs have warmed us
And filled our trees with fruits.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



(cont.)

THE LEAVES IN GRANDMA'S GARDEN

Emily Cook
Bangor NSW

We catch the leaves with stories
Grandma told us long ago
Each one a tiny beacon
She wavers as we glow.

Leaves tower like a lighthouse
They'll shine and guide our way
We'll hold them close, like she held us
They'll comfort, hope and stay.

So let's rest in Grandma's garden
And be grateful for her shade
Brimful with awe at her lush life
Those memories that she made.

FREE VERSE



JUDGES' COMMENT

A beautifully written, deeply moving poem capturing the frustration, heartache and the helplessness felt by an adult child coping with a parent in an advanced stage of dementia. The lack of recognition, confused identities, accusations and violent outbursts by the mother are sensitively interwoven in a cocoon of love, childhood memories and ultimately, acceptance by her devoted daughter. The recurring imagery of the peeled orange with its "petals of gold" adds a very special touch to this very special poem.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

Winning first prize is deeply humbling and I'm honoured that my poem connected so strongly. My heartfelt thanks to the judges and Sutherland Shire for this award.

This poem came from a very personal place: the daily reality of caring for someone who no longer recognises you, and yet love outlasts recognition. I wanted to capture what no one talks about — the accusations, the grief, and the stubborn choice to show up anyway. Writing this was both painful and necessary and I am glad it resonates with others who know love, loss, and memory.

GONE. HERE. BOTH

Kevti Desai
Epping VIC

Mum asks who I am three times before breakfast.
"It's me, Mama. Your Bee." Her eyes go blank
searching for a face she birthed, nursed, raised.

Yesterday she held my face in her palms,
tracing the shape of someone she once knew.
"Were you friends with my Bee? You have her eyes."

I had to leave the room. Again.

Today I peel an orange at her kitchen table
where we rolled pastry every Sunday.
The scent rises, sharp and sweet.
"Oh," she says, humming our song.

Her hands fly out like birds,
sudden, certain, remembering,
deeper than names, older than language,
arranging petals of gold into a flower
the way she made them when I was six.

"There now," she whispers, and for one breath
her eyes find mine and hold,
Clear. Knowing. *Mother.*

Then: "Would you like some tea, love?"

"Love" — Anyone. Everyone. *Me.*

Later to the nurse, "My Bee's visiting me soon,"
she radiates for pigtailed me,
gap-toothed at seven, forever young.

Let her keep that Bee.
The one who never disappointed,
never watched her mother slip away,
never stole from her.

Unlike me, accused of thieving her world:
her money, the three houses she imagined,
even her favorite diamond earrings.

FREE VERSE

1ST
PRIZE

(cont.)

GONE. HERE. BOTH

Kevti Desai
Epping VIC

I snap:
“If I’d taken everything,
I’d be in Noosa drinking cocktails,
not here, peeling your orange!”

“Don’t shout!” her hands pound my chest.
Each blow cracks open another yesterday.

I pull her into a cocoon,
tears slide through her hair.
“I’m sorry, Mama. So sorry.”
She stills — unreachable.

Then,
“Where are my houses?”

I swallow her forgetting,
learn to cradle her accusations,
her fists,
sometimes rehearsing grief
for when her heart stops or lungs give up,
sobbing through years of loss.

But right now, she’s here.

Sort of. Mostly. Enough.

Her arms open when I cry,
though I’m just a stranger who visits Thursdays.
Her hands smooth hair I haven’t worn since I was ten.
Her tea leaf-less, trembling and made of love.
Her hum flowering my orange.

Some days, I’m her Bee she can almost see
a half-remembered song.
Other days, I’m erased.

I come anyway.

Why?

I peel another orange today.
Petals of gold glow between us,
her Bee thrums on.

FREE VERSE

HIGHLY
COMMENDED

FULL CIRCLE

Susanna Elliott-Newth
Woonona NSW

JUDGES’ COMMENT

A personal, reflective poem in the ‘pastoral tradition’ explaining the physical and emotional journey of love in terms of the four seasons and their inevitable passing. Along with the personification of winter, the language and images are skilful and captivating. The true value of the changing seasons is not lost on the writer as spring arrives. Notably, the writer effectively uses the literary technique of enjambment.

AUTHOR’S COMMENT

When I write my poems, people ask me why I’m so sad. I smile wryly and say, “I’m not - emotion ‘is’ where poetry is found!”

Poems are little grains of sand

in which I share an insight into my thoughts.

As they fly through the air,

they sparkle in the light

and morph into words on my pen,

creating lyrical ideas

I craft into poems.

Our love was a season in summer’s joy.
We walked in fields of daisies, our hands clasped,
tripping over carelessly discarded
leaves that crunched and crackled under our feet.
We lay on grasses lost in the moment,
yielding to love, comforted in knowing
that time was an endless, abundant friend.

Our hearts melded as autumnal rains fell,
never dampening our spirits as we
strolled along well-worn paths of boundless time.
We sat by lakesides, lazily letting
the cool lake waters trickle just as lazily
over hands held tightly like blue jasmine,
our lips then sensing that sentient second.

When winter’s wrath graced us with his presence,
we felt his callous meanness and temper.
The tune he whistled singed our ears, freezing
our bodies as we clung tightly for warmth.
When snow laid her silence, we thrummed her beat,
pulses racing in perfect harmony,
as we sat and watched the crashing of waves.

Now season has turned full circle to spring,
when buds appear like colourful diamonds,
exploding into myriads of specks
caught in the shaft of sunlight. I feel your
music, I sense your breath and know your touch.
My love, now lost, is only lost in sight,
for wherever I walk, you walk with me.

FREE VERSE



JUDGES' COMMENT

A very clever reflection on the course of love using the metaphor of a cherished toy. Enjoyed and played with over and again, the well-loved and well-used toy gradually gets damaged and finally is broken and discarded. The poem's opening immediately grabs the reader's attention, with the 'sudden realisation' or understanding of something in the past over a cup of tea being a life experience they may well have shared with the writer.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I'm honoured to receive this prize from the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition, and very grateful for the recognition. I really enjoyed writing Broken Toy. I've always been drawn to ideas that can hold multiple meanings and remain open to interpretation. Exploring a bond through the lens of a childhood toy or doll felt like a profound way to depict something that is innocent yet frayed and forgotten over time. I'm elated and feel more inspired than ever to keep writing and sharing my poetry.

BROKEN TOY

Mann Irin Mian

Sylvania Waters NSW

It came to me suddenly
with tea and biscuits in my hands
going up the stairs
settling down in my room
sitting in front of the mirror
seeing something for what it really is
I am a broken toy.

gave you so much joy, until it ran dry
gave you so much pride, the jewel of your eye.
you took me everywhere, and I willingly went
like a porcelain doll, poised and elegant
quiet, perfect and obedient
because I wanted to be
thought that was how I was meant to be.

and when you moved, I moved with you, holding your hand
adjusted to a new life that was supposed to be ours to spend.
I walked with you,
ran with you
talked with you
played with you
laughed with you
over and over, again and again.

until a crack.
a crack around my neck, and around my head
cracks from the tip of my nose down to my toes
until I was entirely broken.
isn't that the life of a toy, though?
was that how my life was supposed to go?

toys wear out, when shown so much love
but is all that love worth it, when left with dents and scrapes galore?
the look in your eyes, the feel of your arms
are all I think of when I sit here, broken and cold
so much time I spent searching for, your hand to hold.
now that you don't want me, now that you don't need me
when I walk past manicured lawns and white picket fences
I don't think of you.
when my heels click up these dollhouse steps
I don't think of you.
if someday you ever come by
I won't look at you.
and when I lay inside the bed that you made
in this room, where everything is stuck by glue
I will close my eyes, and whisper to the walls a story
of when I was once
a broken toy.

SHORT STORIES

1ST
PRIZE

JUDGES' COMMENT

The author sensitively draws the reader into the reality of life for many teenaged girls of the 1960's and 70's who, finding themselves pregnant and without support, were forced to give up her new-born babies. Outcast, shamed and subjected to cruel, unsympathetic institutional treatment, the girls find support in each other. Aptly titled, the author draws us into the heartache of leaving the girl's home without her child and returning to high school. She later recounts her eventual healing as she returns to the now abandoned home. Only this time, her arms are no longer empty.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am absolutely thrilled and honoured to win this Short Story Literary Competition. Thank you to Sutherland Shire for your support, encouragement and dedication to fostering writers within the community.

Although Empty Arms is written in the first-person, it is not my personal story. Instead, it seeks to capture the heartache experienced by thousands of young girls whose babies were given up for adoption during the 1960s and 1970s. The story reflects the complex, multi-layered grief that many still carry to this day.

EMPTY ARMS

Irene Sheehan

Thirroul NSW

It wasn't really an abbey, but some of the girls called it that. Others called it a prison.

Gravel crunching under my feet, I trudged up the winding driveway to the house. It was a sound embedded in my memory. The front door was smaller than I remember, and the green paint peeling. The imposing sandstone building, once so grandiose and unwelcoming, still looked unwelcoming, but now neglected.

Overgrown ivy covered the walls. One of us had the job to keep it trimmed. It was Josie's job when I first arrived, and when her time was up, Madeline's.

My stomach churned. I didn't want to come, but Jason had encouraged me.

"It's important you go before it's too late. I've heard the building's up for sale. I'll go with you. It'll be OK."

After some discussions, I decided to go, but not with him. "I'll go alone, because that's how it was."

Jason nodded. He got it, as he did all our conversations.

Beautiful Jason, so kind, so thoughtful. Eyes just like his father's. We met once a week now, always in the same café. We are alike in many ways. We hate milky coffee, so we both always order a double shot, and the cup three quarters filled with milk. We laughed at this coincidence at our first meeting, and it broke the tension on that day.

I wanted to turn back, but I didn't. I knocked on the door. The brass knocker was no longer shiny, but tarnished and dull.

It was Mary's job, to scrub the front doorstep every day and polish the knocker. She told Matron the polish made her feel sick, but Matron didn't accept excuses under any circumstances. One day just as a board member was arriving, Mary vomited right there on the doorstep. Matron gave her a different job after that. "Should have spewed on the first day, that'd have shown the old bat," she said, with a wink to her audience.

We laughed so hard, I nearly wet myself.

The door opened and a soft voice said, "Welcome, I'm Catherine." She smiled at me, absentmindedly touching the gold cross around her neck. "It's good you've come back. Some do and some don't. What year were you here?"

"1977."

"Ahh 77, that was a busy time, so many girls" she said frowning. "You know the way, so I'll leave you to walk around. Take your time. I won't be far away if you need me."

I sat on the wooden bench at the bottom of the stairs and took three deep breaths to calm myself. This is where my mother and I sat when I first arrived. Mum didn't speak to me on that six-hour drive from our farm to Sydney. She didn't stay long, just long enough to meet Matron, and sign the forms. She gave me a stiff hug and left, still without talking.

My father refused to come here. He was furious as I'd brought shame on the family. My young brother kept asking where I was going. "Five months away from school, it's not fair. Why can't I have time off school?" I shrugged my shoulders, saying nothing. Dad had forbidden me to tell anyone.

Each day, I scrubbed the stairs, and polished the grand oak banister, until it was as shiny as a new coin. The tasks were given to me upon arrival. I'd taken comfort in this daily routine, as it was the only part of my life that I had any control over.

We worked, until we couldn't.

Rising from the bench, I ascended the stairs in a dream like state. I ran my hand along the smooth winding banister. The stairs creaked in an old familiar way.

We woke each morning at six to a jarring gong, which echoed throughout the building. The day started with prayers in the chapel, followed by breakfast. As instructed, we ate our lumpy porridge in silence but made faces at each other, until someone burst out laughing.

"Stop that racket," Matron would snap. "Instead of laughing, reflect on the sins you've committed."

With that, some girls laughed even more.

At the top of the stairs, I turned left and walked until I came to the recreation room. We girls called this room The Party Room. It was a large sunny lounge area and was the loveliest room in the whole building. I was amazed because it looked the same as before. The outward-opening windows still captured the afternoon sea breeze, and comfortable lemon couches lined the walls. I marvelled as the couches were the same ones we sat on all those years ago.

For a brief time each day, we came here. It was our chance to be the teenagers we were. What fun we had, listening to the top ten hits on a smuggled transistor radio. We sang. We laughed. We danced. We pledged to be friends forever. We held up the miniskirts we'd arrived in and shrieked with laughter. How did we ever fit into them?

We talked about our fears, and what would happen when we left. Would our families forgive us? Would someone ever love us? Would we be destined to be alone, punished for the rest of our lives?

I sat on a lemon couch, thinking of my friends, and the fun times we'd had in this room. I smiled. I appreciated having some pleasant memories of that time.

The place I most needed to see was the birthing wing.

This was on the far side of the house and had always been busy. We were forbidden to go there until it was our time, but we heard cries of pain, shrieks, groans, and tears. We were scared. We didn't know what would happen.

It was a one-way journey. Each day we watched from the windows, as our friends departed down the driveway. There were no goodbyes. Some had parents pick them up, others left alone, a taxi waiting at the end of the drive. All left with empty arms, a sad heart and a life changed forever.

SHORT STORIES



(cont.)

EMPTY ARMS

Irene Sheehan

Thirroul NSW

On the 7 November 1977, it was my turn, with a long slow labour that lasted for 14 hours. The pain of childbirth, I didn't know anything could hurt as much. The shrieks and groans I heard this time, were my own. I cried and called for my mother.

Matron scolded me, "Just stop that racket. You're getting what you deserve."

Finally, my beautiful boy, you arrived. I was one of the more fortunate. For a short time, I got to care for you. I held you. I fed you. I bathed you. I loved you. I whispered your name, Jason.

They were the best days of my life.

On day four, Matron presented me with the form my mother had signed, and you were handed over to your adopting parents. Through my tears I asked Matron to tell your new parents that I called you Jason and how much I loved you.

Matron's face softened, and she nodded.

I made my way down the driveway. No goodbyes, but I knew my friends would be standing at the window watching. I turned and gave a farewell wave. Like the others before me, my arms were empty, and my heart broken.

My mother was waiting at the end of the driveway. She gave me her stiff hug but didn't ask any questions, so I said nothing. The journey back home was slow and long. She told me I'd be returning to school the next year and repeating year 10. If anyone asked where I'd been, I was to say I'd been visiting a relative overseas.

The birthing room no longer contained any fixtures or equipment. The afternoon sun calmed my tense mind. I closed my eyes. The silence engulfed me. I felt at peace. My broken heart had healed.

Jason, you were right. I needed to come back.

SHORT STORIES



ADEQUATE COMPENSATION

Carmel Lillis

Yarraville VIC

Suddenly old, you lean heavily onto your stick. Shed by a ghost gum in a storm, you've used it for weeks to soothe the cows up the track to milking. You squint into the sun, its light dappling your grain paddocks in every hue of gold. Pull your cap lower. Sigh an old man's sigh.

At your feet, Monty, your heeler-cross, crouches – one eye shut, the other alert for the call to action.

Let the stick topple beside the shotgun half-hidden in the grass. Study, really study these hands.

Could you have deceived yourself all these years?

"These are not the hands of a thug; these are the hands of a farmer," you'd have said. "Bit rough on the eyes, these knuckles? Knobbled from scrapes and knocks hauling hay bales."

Turn the hands over. "This ragged pattern of stitches? Sewed that up myself. Done in the days when the wife and I were still wresting the farm from the bankers my old man had mortgaged our future to.

The finger-nails? Blackened in farm implements sprung shut too soon; stunted in the damp of dairy work, washing cream separators before we started trading 'full cream.'

Even the missing top of this thumb – caught in the milking machine belt before plastic surgery wrought its magic on the world. Hardly missed it. Considered it a donation to a worthwhile cause."

The bequest of land. Nothing like it. "Your great-great grandparents planted this orchard," you tell your grandchildren. Their brows furrow with the effort of imagining anyone so far back in the Dark Ages.

These are the hands of a father, too. A man who cradled four babies; fingers around which tiny fists coiled.

But what are you now?

"These are not the hands of a violent man," you'd have insisted if anyone had dredged up the family pedigree. Yes, this son of Iron-Bar Murphy, boozier and stirrer, jettisoned his old man's legacy to create a new identity. "Murphy's don't raise their hands in anger," you

JUDGES' COMMENT

A fifth-generation farmer whose holding is about to be compulsorily acquired calls into question the adequacy of compensation only to realise the true value of his land is far more than the dollars and cents offered; it's the family life and embedded history that will soon be only memories. With excellent dialogue and descriptive narrative, the writer brilliantly recounts how the farmer comes to appreciate that his devotion to the land and his anger at losing it mirrors the hurt to the local indigenous people of losing their land of the dreamtime and to call into question his right of ownership.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

So many histories have been tragically erased; so many stories remain untold. Yet to fail to tell the stories of the dispossessed is to dispossess twice over.

This short piece explores the capacity of remembered histories to awaken empathy and to forge connections. It aims to affirm the importance of both continuing to tell our own stories, and to hear and value the stories of others.

Thank you to Sutherland Shire for fostering and encouraging writers through these prestigious awards, which inspired each entrant to craft a story or poem important to them.



(cont.)

ADEQUATE COMPENSATION

Carmel M Lillis

Yarraville VIC

taught your children, and they now teach theirs. “We’ve left all that punching on behind us. We Murphy’s negotiate, we compromise.”

Easy to embrace peacemaking in peaceful times.

*

Where was the pacifist skulking when the provocateur pressed him?

For years, descendants of neighbours who once feared the family, have sought out this Murphy for his commonsense and wisdom.

This morning, though, that young fella trussed into a city suit sought no counsel when he rapped on the screen-door. Instead, he came bearing papers marked with X’s to indicate the places you must sign.

“You’ve received our certified letters. We know you signed for them. You were invited to community meetings to consult. Only we never heard back from you.” So said the shiny-shoed fella with the laptop.

Intolerable cant. “Plenty I know went to your meetings, made their opinions known. Are you suggesting you’re not descending upon their farms today demanding they sign the exact same document you’re thrusting before me?”

“There were details you could have influenced,” insisted the earnest young fella, puffing out his badged chest bearing the words DEPARTMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE.

“And saved my land from your bulldozers? Stopped your lot from knocking down my fences, burying my trees and paddocks beneath your snaking freeway? Bulldust.”

You buried your hands in the pockets of your overalls. “Got a few minutes?”

The young fella shrugged and zipped the Government papers into his briefcase.

A heft off the wooden veranda, a few strides to the house fence. You lifted a half-circle of wire off a wooden post and pushed the gate open. Remembered you need to oil the squeaks out of that gate; then remembered it was probably pointless. Monty, yellow eyes flashing, lunged after you. “Down.

Get down,” you commanded. The dog’s tail disappeared between her speckled legs; she clamped her muzzle over the pointy teeth embedded in the mottled jaws. But a low growl betrayed her.

You flicked the latch on her chain and the dog trotted across the rise with you. The hair on the ridge of her back hackled so, she resembled a miniature dragon. The young man fell behind to drift across to the far side, and you had to suppress a smile.

You walked your visitor past the sheds to a waterhole. Stifled a chuckle as the bureaucrat picked his way around cow pads. Mid-morning, the sun already stung. Across the lush patchwork of your watered paddocks, ibises in feathered tutus tiptoed like ballerinas exercising after injury.

How to explain to this fella that this land is not just any land. Every tree a familiar friend; the very soil bears your family’s name. You can picture your ancestor here, a tenant farmer forced from his strip of country in the Great Irish Famine of ‘48. That dispossessed man had begun as a shepherd, got himself a small block, and when he felt secure in it, sent for his sweetheart. By their thrift and their toil, they’d bought out others until they had three hundred acres.

“Even this dog...from a long line of cattle dogs bred here.”

You had the fella’s attention. Or the bureaucrat had decided to humour you – an old man indulging in a bit of nostalgia. Perhaps he had a grandfather like you, and was practised in the art of coddling sentimental old men.

“They milked thirty cows by hand, you know. Set the milk; made butter. Took it round the gold towns and sold it for threepence a pound.” You were seizing the only chance you would ever have.

“When I shut my eyes, they’re here, my people; always with me.”

At the tinkle of a ring-tone, the young fella checked the caller identity; he did not take the call.

But the spell was shattered. Suddenly shy, you could not now say what you had meant to. How to explain, without sounding like a daft old fool, that just as this soil carries the blood and

sweat of those ancestors, it holds the fresh new breath of your grandchildren.

In the bureaucrat’s puckered forehead above clouded eyes, you read hope. A twinge of pity gnawed at your conscience. Just a kid, this young fella, donning a hard-arse mask to pay his rent.

You stood silent, eucalypt tickling your nostrils and sun tanning your skin.

Till the bureaucrat cleared his throat, and laid his hand on your shoulder. “But, Sir,” he said, “you needn’t worry. You will be given adequate compensation.”

In that moment, the scourge of your ancestors, lying so dormant in your own being you’d believed it extinct, suffered a seismic shift. You felt the molten lava of fury surge and swell as you loomed over the young bureaucrat. The shrinking away before the push to the white-shirted chest prodded a sleeping bully into wakefulness.

“Take your papers. Get off my land. These hands will never sign, so you’re wasting your time,” you roared. “Did I ask for your ‘mandatory valuations’ and the other vile drivel you lot spew forth? This land is mine. Crushed and buried – to slake the endless greed for speed of city slickers like yourself. What compensation could possibly be adequate for that?”

With each step, with each thrust of the calloused hand against the white shirt that made its wearer look as saved as a peddling Bible basher, the bureaucrat staggered backwards.

Until the polished shoes slipped and skidded on the cow trampled grass and he lurched into the waterhole. Monty leapt forward; you felt the hand which seized her collar quaver.

Shaking off the muddy water, the bureaucrat spluttered, “You’ll be hearing from us... And if the Department sees fit to pursue this...the cost of my suit... shoes...”

He gathered up his briefcase and his battered dignity. Moments stretched to infinity as he straddled the fence. A heave took him over, but a barb caught his pants at the last. In the rip, you heard a cry and you winced.

You found the government papers later. Damp and ink-stained. Still utterly legible.



(cont.)

ADEQUATE COMPENSATION

Carmel M Lillis

Yarraville VIC

Shoved into your roadside mail-box, with a sticky note
'Please re-consider.'

*

You hear yourself groan as you bend to retrieve your stick. Shut your eyes. The golden stubble, the fences and paddocks melt away. How wooded and dense this land must have looked when your ancestors came upon it. Brush strokes of vibrant colour. A land of river red gums and native bushes, through which kangaroos hopped to the creek below to quench their thirst on scorched, still days like this one.

In that landscape, a man as old as yourself, the leader of his tribe, stands on the same hill, watching the same valley below. This man's gaze is fixed upon another man, perhaps a ghost, moving across the land of his ancestors. The land promised to his descendants, the land of the dreamtime.

But the ghost has not come with a briefcase to invite the leader to a community consultation. You shudder. You hope your ancestors had not come with guns. Will you ever know for sure? From a family of story-tellers, you drank in tales of leprechauns with your mother's milk. Those legendary rebels 'fighting down O'Connell Street,' inspired your thirst for justice. A desire as familiar as breathing. But what was the story of this land on which you now stand, in the days before the first Murphy strung his bit of canvas between two gum trees?

You can be certain only of one thing: that the proud warrior who leant upon his spear never heard the words 'Adequate Compensation.'

Did the warrior and his tribe fight? Never heard about that either.

How that tribal leader must have wept as those saws slashed his children's future, wiped their past. How the hands that gripped the spear must have flexed and itched to stop the ghost. Just where did the descendants go? Were they decimated, or did they re-group to walk elsewhere? Did their hearts yearn still for the land of their dreamtime? Could they ever erase it from their minds?

The time-line your grandson had to draw up for homework – you've been trying to erase that from your

own memory. It comes now unbidden, nonetheless insistent for that. The boy had been flummoxed over the scale, and your fingers had fumbled over the sticky tape to add sheet after sheet of paper, till the document stretched across the table and dangled to the floor. "Perhaps, young fella, you should've done the scale a bit smaller. Like a centimetre for each thousand years."

The boy's retort? "Grandpa, our family in Australia would just be a skinny pen-mark on the time-line then."

The wisdom of the lad. The shock of it. As if a giant, hell-bent on stirring, had shaken the very foundations of your world.

Your family, on this spot, a mere bloody vertical pen-stroke on the time-line of humankind.

Yet how you will feel the loss of it.

Well, these hands of yours, gnarled as they are, can still hold a document. These hands can grip a pen.

Yes, these hands will whiten and grow soft in town, their only work the tending of a small vegetable patch, and the dutiful wheeling of a supermarket trolley for the wife. The putting in of an occasional request for "a bit of that white bread, Love, 'cos the grainy stuff gets caught under my dentures."

A nudge of her wet nose...Monty, reminding you there's still cows to milk. You stroke the hair, bristly as a wire brush. "Hey girl. You reckon you'll take to town life?"

The hand that picks up the shotgun and removes the safety catch trembles. Monty tenses, ears forward, eyes slitted, head tilted – the unexpected joy of rabbiting. You show her the stick, hurl it into the scrub. "Go fetch, girl," you whisper. You raise the shotgun to your shoulder and press your cheek into the stock.

Monty crashes through the bush, her lips curled into a smile around the stick.

The hand that presses the trigger is strong and steady.

SHORT STORIES



JUDGES' COMMENT

The tension builds in this poignant story mirroring the unrelenting pressure on a mother as joins the line of cars at the end of the school day waiting to collect her autistic child. We are drawn into her world of worry, loneliness, frustration and never-ending caring. But the mother's life is brought to light in that moment she sees one small gesture by her son that keeps alive the small hope that she has for him. And we rejoice with her.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

The Carline was born from the mundane moments we often overlook. The small, ordinary spaces where something deeper is quietly held. I'm honoured it was seen.

THE CARLINE

Kathleen Blythe

Como NSW

The clock on the dashboard ticks over. **2:30**. It's go time.

I let out a loose breath and blink hard, shaking off the sleepiness that crept in while I waited. I turn the key and my trusty old Outlander roars to life. Air blows into my face—too warm at first, then slowly cooling—and I turn it up, just to keep the tiredness away.

Let's go. Let's go. Let's go.

It's a mantra I've grown used to thinking as I follow the cavalcade of minibuses toward the school gates. Less a hurry-up than a small act of encouragement.

The gates open with a yawn, swallowing one vehicle after another, and I slip in behind them. I've timed it perfectly, as I do every day, so I land in the fifth spot. The one right in front of the steps. The one he can see from the top gate—the one that tells him I'm already there, waiting.

The transport drivers spill out of their buses and chat among themselves, with wide smiles and easy banter. I watch them from behind the dash, like I do every afternoon, and wonder what they talk about.

Do they ever wonder about me?

The mother who arrives early and waits half an hour to collect her child. Do they think that's odd? Do they understand why I need that fifth spot every single day?

I beam them a smile whenever one of them comes to look my way, always hoping it looks genuine. Kind. Friendly. All the things people expect a mother to be.

I turn off the engine; it ticks, ticks, ticks until finally going silent, then I roll the windows down. I open the pack of Oreo minis—original flavour, of course—and place it on the centre console. Then I unseal and pop the top of the 30% apple juice bottle. Fridge-cooled and full to the brim—and only fridge-cooled and full to the brim—I place that on the centre console as well.

I'm not sure when this ritual began. It was probably recommended to me by his dietitian, feeding therapist, or—was it the positive behaviour practitioner? Maybe it's just me, trying to ensure he hasn't gone a full school day without folding in on himself, starved and thirsty. Just me trying to ensure he doesn't get home in a state. Still, there are reasons for these small arrangements. Reasons I don't usually explain, because explanations invite questions, and questions invite opinions.

I look up pensively at the people outside my window. Does anyone else do this, too?

One of the transport drivers walks past my window and looks briefly at her watch. She inches towards me with a warm smile.

'You're so organised, always so early!' she says, almost praising.

I offer her a timid smile. *If only she knew.*

2:35. Ten minutes to go, and the kids start streaming out, accompanied by an aide, teacher, or guardian, spilling into their vehicles headed home. Somewhere inside the gates, a young child is screaming. I'm unsure if it's a cry of happiness or something else, but the guilt barely has time to surface before it's eclipsed by relief—that at least it isn't mine.

Not my child.

It's a thought I'd never give a voice to, but if I heard it from someone else's mouth, would I care? No. No, I wouldn't.

The sun warms my face, the slight breeze whips the hair around me, and when I close my eyes, I block out all the external noise. For a little while, I manage to block out the inside ones, too.

My phone buzzes in the cup holder, the vibration waking me from my stupor. It's my husband.

Had a long, crap day of meetings. Might stay out for drinks. Won't be late. Do you need me?

A line etches on my brow. I look at the screen for a beat, not quite knowing what to reply.

It's fine. It's fine. It's fine.

But something inside me ripples.

I sigh and put my phone back in the cup holder, leaving him on read.

Out my window, I watch a dad who looks about my age—though it's hard to tell. Parents like us seem to wear time a little heavier. I touch the top of my head as I glance at my reflection in the rearview. Short, wiry coils of silver jut through the black.

Premature ageing—hurrah.

Muted laughter echoes outside my window, and my gaze snaps back to the top gate. The dad is laughing at something the teacher's aide says. I wonder what joke is said; is it something about the weather? He comes to pick up his son on Fridays and drops him off on Mondays, every two weeks. It's a ritual I've witnessed for half a decade. I pretend not to look as he walks down the steps, his son's hand grasped in his as they talk about what movie they're going to watch after dinner.

I know the answer to this one. *Madagascar*. Always *Madagascar*. I chuckle despite myself.

I wonder what it's like to only have your child every other week. To know what it feels like to step out of the work now and then.

I know the statistics. I've heard them so often they've lost their edge. People like to talk about how couples with children like ours are more likely to break apart.

Nobody ever talks about what it takes to stay.

And I've had enough of statistics.

Once the father and son disappear from the view of my side mirror, I pick up my phone again. I re-read my husband's text: **Do you need me?**

Al/ways.

Hey. You've worked so hard, go for it! Maybe we can do lunch on Sunday when we have respite? Enjoy yourself. Love you!



(cont.)

THE CARLINE

Kathleen Blythe

Como NSW

I take a deep breath as I watch the three dots appear on the screen.

Woo-hoo! Thanks, bub. I won't stay out too late, and we can go to that Thai place you like. You have a good day?

I smile. I do love Thai food.

Staring at the screen, I bite my lip.

My stomach grumbles loudly.

My thumb hovers over the keys. I type, delete, and re-type.

I did. Same old-same old.

Then, later, I add a heart emoji.

2:40. Five more minutes. The children are being ushered out of their rooms now, bags on their backs, some without their shoes, some with their headphones on. I spot him at the same time he spots me. He doesn't smile or acknowledge he's seen me, but he walks up front and centre to the gates and glares at the car, ready and waiting.

I take stock of the car and make sure everything is in place. **2:45.** A teacher comes to the outside of the top gate, clipboard in hand, and looks out to the carline. She meets my eyes, and I put my smile on. She calls out to my son, his fingers firmly plunged into his ears. He waits until his teacher stands beside him. He waits still for the gate to open. Then, together, they walk out.

I still have my smile planted firmly on my face as I watch him take one step at a time in the caged sandals he will only wear. As he gets closer, I hear his little *ooh-oohs*. I brace myself, not knowing if that's a precursor to some dreaded behaviour later in the afternoon.

All the while, my smile doesn't falter.

Just *non-verbal* sounds, I think, then quickly admonish myself. The correct term is *pre-verbal*, they say. The word is more *positive*, they say.

Person-first language.

No. Identity-first language is better.

You use what the community uses.

No. You use what the family uses.

I blink out of my head before it explodes, and I'm brought back to the present. The aide puts his seatbelt on as he reaches out for his drink.

'How'd you go?' I ask tentatively.

Of course, he doesn't answer.

'Had a good day, didn't we, buddy?' the aide says, her platinum mohawk especially high with new hot-pink tips. 'Cheeky though—got into the finger paint and made a mess on the carpet.'

My stomach sinks. 'Oh no,' I gasp, only just spotting the state of his shirt. 'Sorry.'

'Nah, don't apologise,' she says as the heat rises up to my cheeks. 'It's all part of it.'

Right. That, I know too. You shouldn't apologise for the things they can't help. I just nod.

'We also need more nappies,' she starts. 'Reckon we have enough for Monday, and don't forget Tuesday—he's got high school orientation.'

I nod again as I add those things to my mental checklist.

She opens her mouth again to say something when a loud smack reverberates in the car. He hits her dead across the face before we can even fathom what's happening. I gasp again, cold dread coiling in my stomach.

'No!' I say, maybe too loudly. 'Gentle hands! Gentle hands!' The sunnies she's wearing are now askew on her neck.

'Sorry, mate,' she says softly, holding his little hand in hers. 'Talked too much, eh?'

I meet her gaze with an apologetic look. I can't find the words to say sorry. She smiles at me and shakes her head, as if to say *Don't worry about it*.

It makes me feel worse.

'Anyway, have a good weekend, little man. I'll see you on Monday.' She ruffles his hair softly. 'Be good to your mum.'

I wave at her as hot tears sting my eyes. If it couldn't be helped, why does it feel so bad?

I glance at him through the rearview as I pull out of the carline. I make my way up to the top of the driveway, toward the turning circle.

My thoughts drift back to the day he was diagnosed. How we had the hope that he would grow up to be *okay*. If we got him early intervention, enough therapies, training, and help, he would be okay. And what did the aide say? *High school?* And we are nowhere near that initial hope.

I listen to him pull long gulps of his juice, and when I hear the pop that indicates he's finished, I wait for the eventual splash of liquid behind my ankles as he throws the bottle under my seat, spilling the rest of the contents on the carpet.

But the thump never comes.

Instead, I hear the bottle slot back into the drink holder on the centre console.

'Good job, mate,' I say, surprised, as I exit the school gates. He giggles as I meet his eyes in the rearview, my chest swollen with pride. 'Thank you for putting your bottle back when you finished.'

'Good boy.'

I take a left toward home, my speed gauged at 40. I turn the radio up slightly, but it's still quiet enough for his sensitive ears.

He munches on the Oreo minis.

Finally, at **2:50**, I realise:

Hope can change shape.



2023 LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS



NOTES

TRADITIONAL VERSE Prize Winners

First Prize
Emerging Shadows - Tom McLveen, Port
Macquarie NSW

Shire Resident's Prize
The Moment - Michelle Garbutt, Oyster
Bay NSW

FREE VERSE Prize Winners

First Prize
when the frozen streets impose upon my
slow-flow yoga class - Sharon Rockman,
Elsternwick VIC

Highly Commended
Stilled Life - Sue Lockwood, Eltham VIC

Shire Resident's Prize
Emerging vol. 1 Butterflies and Moths -
John Burns, Engadine

SHORT STORIES Prize Winners

First Prize
The Guest - Rachel Flynn, Fitzroy North
VIC

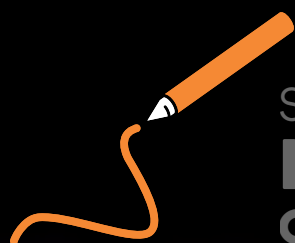
Highly Commended
The Stories We Tell - Freya Cox,
Blackmans Bay TAS

Shire Resident's Prize
Out of the Woodwork - KT Major, Jannali
NSW

Shire Resident's Highly Commended
Muses of the Council Pickup - Jacinta
Frawley Werger, Sutherland NSW



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Sutherland Shire
LITERARY
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2026