

Sutherland Shire
LITERARY
COMPETITION
2023



MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

I am thrilled to extend my congratulations to each entrant for their remarkable submissions and achievements in the 2023 Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. As Mayor of Sutherland Shire, I take immense pride in the literary talents that our community possesses. It is truly inspiring to witness the diversity of voices that come together to celebrate the art of writing.

The Sutherland Shire has always been home to an extraordinary breadth of literary talent. Our community is known for its eagerness to embrace opportunities that allow local literary enthusiasts, as well as aspiring scribes from far and wide, to express their creative capacities through inclusive forums.

The nationally acclaimed Sutherland Shire Literary Competition has, since 2018, provided a vital platform for passionate writers to put pen to paper and contribute original works. It has offered all entrants an invaluable platform to showcase their talents and a chance to receive specialised feedback from an expert panel of independent judges.

This competition has grown and evolved over the years, welcoming entries from people across the country and from all walks of life, each with a unique story to tell. Council initiated this competition as a way of recognising the rich diversity of literary talent, not just within the Sutherland Shire, but throughout the entire nation. It is heartening to see how this competition has encouraged those with a deep love of literature to share their beautiful words and creative talents with others who have an equally profound appreciation for the art of writing.

I would like to express my gratitude to this year's judges, award-winning poet writer and editor, Tricia Dearborn, and the award-winning novelist and nonfiction writer, Mandy Sayer, for their unwavering encouragement and commitment to the competition. Their considerable time and effort went into meticulously reviewing numerous entries and providing their valued expert commentary.

The success of this competition is a testament to the collective energy and vision contributed by those who work behind the scenes to bring it to life, as well as those who participate by sharing their creativity and storytelling prowess.

In closing, I congratulate all entrants and, of course, our winners, for their entries that have enriched our literary landscape. This year's contributions are a source of inspiration and a reflection of the thriving literary spirit within the Sutherland Shire and beyond. Thank you for making this competition a resounding success.

Councillor Carmelo Pesce
Sutherland Shire Mayor



TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Winners	4
Judge's Reports	5
TRADITIONAL VERSE	
Winner	Emerging Shadows Tom McLveen, Port Macquarie NSW 6
Shire Resident's Prize	The Moment Michelle Garbutt, Oyster Bay NSW 8
FREE VERSE	
Winner	when the frozen streets impose upon my slow-flow yoga class Sharon Rockman, Elsternwick VIC 9
Highly Commended	Stilled Life Sue Lockwood, Eltham VIC 11
Shire Resident's Prize	Emerging vol. 1 Butterflies and Moths John Burns, Engadine NSW 12
SHORT STORY	
Winner	The Guest Rachel Flynn, Fitzroy North VIC 14
Highly Commended	The Stories We Tell Freya Cox, Blackmans Bay TAS 18
Shire Resident's Prize	Out of the Woodwork KT Major, Jannali NSW 22
Shire Resident's Highly Commended	Muses of the Council Pickup Jacinta Frawley Werger, Sutherland NSW 26
List of 2021 Competition Winners	30
Sponsors	31

Sutherland Shire Literary Competition Publication	Each individual author asserts her/his moral right to be acknowledged as the author or her/his respective works.
© 2023 Sutherland Shire Council	All rights reserved.
Copyright in the works reproduced in the publication vests in the individual respective authors.	Reproduction or public performance of any of the works herein without permission of the respective authors is strictly Forbidden.



LIST OF WINNERS

TRADITIONAL VERSE

Winner	Emerging Shadows - Tom McLveen, Port Macquarie NSW
Shire Resident's Prize	The Moment - Michelle Garbutt, Oyster Bay NSW

FREE VERSE

Winner	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 NSW

SHORT STORY

Winner	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

POETRY JUDGE'S REPORT

It's been a privilege to judge the poetry sections of the 2023 Sutherland Literary Competition, and interesting to see what the poets who chose to engage with this year's theme of 'Emerging' made of it. I looked for poems that caught and held my attention; that had something to say; that made good use of language and rhythm, of metaphor and imagery; that were original; and that worked well on their own terms, while fulfilling the requirements of their form.

Tricia Dearborn

SHORT STORY JUDGE'S REPORT

"What is unique about the short story is that we can all tell one, live one, write one down." Australian novelist Christina Stead wrote this line almost fifty years ago, but the sentiment is as relevant today in the digital era as it was when we sat around campfires, trading yarns. The seventy entries for the 2023 Sutherland Short Story Award encompassed a vast range of subject matter and style, reflecting both the lived and the imagined experiences of writers around our country.

Several included historical figures, including Matthew Flinders and Christina Stead herself, while others set in contemporary times reflected on the cycles of life, and the inseparability of past, present, and future. However, the most pervasive subject was the recent pandemic, and its consequences for everyday people struggling in isolation and fear. Some stories addressed the virus directly, detailing the devastating impact upon daily routines and social connections; others dealt with it more obliquely, in settings of a 19th century Sydney riddled with a rat plague. Two entries were set in the Manly quarantine station, the site where so many struggling immigrants lost their lives to earlier contagious diseases, deftly acknowledging the troubles of the present by narrating those of the past.

That is the beauty of the short story: it can take you anywhere, anytime, into a futuristic cyberspace, or back into the stone age, where our stories first began.

Mandy Sayer

TRADITIONAL VERSE



EMERGING SHADOWS

Tom McLveen

Port Macquarie NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This poem displays an assured use of rhyme and scansion – the reader can relax in the knowledge that they're in good hands. Within this secure structure, an interesting narrative skilfully unfolds, including imagery that is both vivid and instantly familiar. The poet makes good use of colloquial language, and the poem is all the more moving for not being at all sentimental.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am absolutely thrilled and honoured to win this very prestigious award, and would like to sincerely thank Sutherland Shire for supporting, fostering and encouraging Australian poets and writers. My poem EMERGING SHADOWS, was inspired by a recent trip to Sydney, where we got to walk the streets of Sydney's CBD.

I was shocked to find homeless people literally living on the street, so far removed from life as we know it here in Port Macquarie. One man in particular, inspired me to write this poem, as I established a silent rapport with him by dropping a coin into his jar.

He momentarily looked into my eyes to thank me, and in that moment I realised that he had once been somebody's brother, father, husband, son or friend.

"Come and walk beside me brother, come and take a stroll with me,

on a road less travelled and less understood.

*Let me show you things that ordinary people never see
on suburban streets beyond their neighbourhood.*

*Come and walk a mile in battered shoes with soles as
bare as those*

who emerge like hungry shadows from the street.

*They are vacant eyed and draped in someone else's
shabby clothes,*

wearing someone's battered shoes upon their feet.

*If you stop awhile and gaze into the pool of vacant eyes,
you may see a memory that stirs within;*

*for behind the faded curtain and the dingy, grey disguise,
there's a soul that bears an unforgotten sin.*

*If you look a little deeper you will see emotion there -
a reflection of what was and could have been.*

*Could it be regret or shame concealed behind that
vacant stare,*

for the boy who ruled the streets at seventeen?

*He was once a fearless hooligan – the king of Sydney
Town,*

and was known from Caringbah to La Perouse.

*Though he'd had no throne or royalty, he'd worn the
kingdom's crown,*

till he'd hocked it for amphetamines and booze.

*If you drop a coin into his jar he'll conjure up a smile
and begin to blow a tune for you and dance.*

*With his rusty old harmonica he'll warble for while,
and then disappear into another trance.*

*Come and meet the quirky lady who emerges
right on cue*

from behind a shroud of plastic bags and lace.

*She was once a wife and mother, and a
ballerina too...*

in another world, another time and place.

*You might think that she's peculiar, a little odd
perhaps...*

in her battered shoes and multicoloured rags.

*She is scavenging for cigarettes and rotting
kitchen scraps,*

*from a garbage filled with empty cans and
bags."*

*They reminded me of someone from my early
childhood days...*

could it be a faded memory of me?

*Or perhaps another shadow seen emerging
from the haze -*

a reflection of what was and what could be?

*I have walked a mile in battered shoes and
tasted bitter wine,*

on forgotten streets beyond my neighbourhood.

*I have walked with those whose journeys were
on steeper paths than mine -*

on the road less travelled and least understood.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



THE MOMENT

Michelle Garbutt

Oyster Bay NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

'The Moment', while short, takes the reader on a great ride. It got my attention with the first stanza – in particular, 'I stepped into sorrow' – and I read on intrigued, wondering what could be causing the existential difficulties described in vivid sensory terms. Here, what emerges is the truth of the situation. I won't spoil the ending.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

My family enjoys reading children's poetry and rhyming books together. These works often have humour and a simple structure. 'The Moment' uses these qualities for an adult audience. I am very humbled by its inclusion in this year's Sutherland Shire Literary Competition.

First I was barefoot
Then I was bent
I stepped into sorrow – that was The Moment.

I'm not me
I'm not sound
I lay crumpled on the ground.

Blurry vision
Enshrouds my head
Bubbling, burning, bold, bright red.

Forever changed
My pain a ten
Will I ever walk again?

First I was barefoot
Then I was bent
I stepped on my Lego – that was The Moment.

FREE VERSE



WHEN THE FROZEN STREETS IMPOSE UPON MY SLOW- FLOW YOGA CLASS

Sharon Rockman

Elsternwick VIC

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This poem has an intriguing title and a strong opening. It's very lean – there's nothing extraneous. It's a dynamic combination of action, sensory detail and of freezing as both atmosphere and metaphor: the frozen streets, the protagonist's brother's 'glacial addiction'. The poet skilfully uses imagery to convey the protagonist's emergence into a state of deep feeling.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

What an honour. Thanks so much to the judges and to Sutherland Shire. Although I live in Melbourne, it is so exciting to receive this prize from our rival city. The poem was inspired by my own experiences of being raised between two families following my parents' divorce when I was only eight months old. The drifting between houses and lives was something I've always held, have always wanted to write about, and I deliberately chose space travel imagery to convey the practical difficulties as well as the ensuing feelings of alienation. It was therapeutic and strangely effortless to write this poem and I feel validated that others have also enjoyed its poignant humour.

tripping into yoga
i throw my boots
on the rack
pull off my
signature yellow woollen beanie
and sling down my bag
which pulls
against my clavicle

but life refuses to
follow my feet
and the phone peals
with a call i
cannot ignore
so i exit in reverse
bag
beanie
boots
and the policeman
beyond the crackle
is polite enough
tapping away and talking
without instilling much
by way of faith
as the streets freeze over
there's more tapping
and a dutiful sigh
because the records
are updated
while my brother continues
his glacial addiction
ices over and over
shattering
his fate
and family
because he can't help
himself
while he's not
himself

FREE VERSE



(cont.) WHEN THE FROZEN STREETS IMPOSE UPON MY SLOW- FLOW YOGA CLASS

Sharon Rockman
Elsternwick VIC

tripping into yoga
a second time
i throw my boots
on the rack
pull off my
signature yellow woollen beanie
and sling down my bag
which pulls
against my clavicle
i slink
into the back row
but my tree pose
falters
because the ground
is gone
but i go through
the motions
and finally
i fold

FREE VERSE



STILLED LIFE

Sue Lockwood
Eltham VIC

JUDGE'S COMMENT

In this poem, which begins quietly, the 'gloomy corners' of the speaker's mind are juxtaposed with the contents of the room in which they sit, vividly described. A meditation on mind and memory with idiosyncratic imagery and description, and a cracker last line.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I began writing my poem 'Stilled Life' during lockdown when my imagination attuned to my immediate surroundings. A feeling of time free-floating made its way into the poem, as did dream and reading experiences, and anticipating the pleasures and anxieties of re-entering the outside world. I thank the judges for awarding my poem. I am grateful to Sutherland Shire Council and Sutherland Shire Libraries for their literary awards which offer encouragement and validation to writers.

Next to my slip-covered sofa it's almost leafy.
Shadows make the yellow wall a dune,
grass-shoots grey and dull brown. The sage
green lamp, upright and still, drops
a triangle of light on the cover of The Waves.
Back-lit, I read distractedly, pluck phrases
from congregations of my own breath,
sigh before a sort of altar.

My mind is a room for contemplation.
I gaze into its gloomy corners then focus
on a torpedo-shaped bottle, circa 1870,
balanced on the windowsill, refilled
with aquamarine sunlight. It sits alongside
a 1918 postcard of Pasternak dressed
as though living in the 1960's, where
I return often, chronology a dying art.

On the periphery, images of poise
and mystery floating in luminous October.
I drink tea and at night dream of sailing, not
altogether unpleasant. Musty linen comforts
despite misgivings, distracts me from myself.
On distant farms patches of churned earth
sprout with wildflowers and music.
After hibernation I emerge into predicament.

FREE VERSE



EMERGING VOL. 1: BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS

John Burns

Engadine NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This poem is not 'polished' – and that works in its favour. It has originality and flair, hurtles and halts, crackles and snaps. It plays with humour and absurdity, and juxtaposes the mythical with the everyday to great effect, as in the moths who 'fly like Icarus, breathlessly aiming for eternity till the sensor on the back door turns the spotlight off'.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

It was via this competition that I was given a surreptitious reason to write something a little broader than my usual workplace emails. The 2023 topic of emerging from COVID 19, resonated with me. COVID was one of those rare phenomena that seem to connect everyone. It was big, the biggest thing since the war, or a war at least. But all big things full of importance and meaning seem to evaporate into the ether just as quick when the next big thing occurs. This worried me. I tried to reflect and realised that pretty soon I'd be reflecting on someone else's memories, if I didn't give my own some form of empirical existence. So instead of the usual workplace email, I spent an hour or so on a couple of Bondi Junction services putting memory to verse. I give a heartfelt thanks to all those who read my words and gave my prose its own moment of posterity.

An artificial idiot climbs from underneath his bed, stumbles into his old routine and this is what he says "everything's the same, but the same isn't what it used to be".

In and out, back and forth, two or more years lost. There was a time when I was forty five but now I realise, I am not. Locked inside for my own protection, entombed for a while for my own resurrection. Was it all worthwhile? What was the truth?

All masked up with no safe to blow, people judge you harshly if you sneeze. I've never even tried a snort of Cocaine up my nose. Temperature checks, nasal swabs and a sticker so they know that you are clean. I've got a certificate to prove it to my boss.

I had to go to work; I couldn't fake it from home. Well I did it once, but they didn't like me typing in the nude. Now I climb aboard the public transport system, train like a caterpillar crawling cross the Como Rail Bridge to pastures fresh and few.

I hold my breath and hope for the best. Back and forth, in and out, moving as if I know which way to go. Tracking my steps on a treadmill, losing calories like a marathon runner whose race is in another's lounge room, high above the second floor. Move, move, run for your life, four apples, two pears delivered in a box now. You won't get much more past your front door.

There are many things I now realise I could have been in my life, but the flashbacks are few and farther between. Today all I am is like a skip on a record, like a skip on a. Oh well. This timing doesn't fit in, jarring the notes in, with the melody that remains.

Emerging from a chrysalis, a being reformed from the goo that's all gone before. I can be a butterfly or moth now. There's a distinction to be made here. If I am going to emerge then what am I emerging for?

Everything is alright; it must be because they said so. And the Loch Ness Monster was found living with Elvis up a tree. Time to tie up all the loose ends now; I'll practice with a lasso round the sun. Everything is normal said the hatter to the hedgehog. Believe it and be it, even though it's obviously not. Balancing all about what was and what will be. Talking to myself in a land that time forgot.

Butterflies are colourful, dancing dreamers. They celebrate the sunshine until their lungs give out. Moths are beige, patterned, and fastidious. Living in darkness, they'll do nothing then fly like Icarus, breathlessly aiming for eternity till the sensor on the back door turns the spotlight off.

Everything's the same, but the same isn't what it used to be.

SHORT STORY

WINNER

THE GUEST

Rachel Flynn

Fitzroy North VIC

JUDGE'S COMMENT

A gently humorous story about difficult subjects, this story stood out for its telling details and air of mystery. Who is the man from the narrator's past? Who is the guest? And how many eccentricities will he reveal before he leaves? It can also be read as a reverse Cinderella story, set in contemporary suburbia.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

It's lovely to win the Sutherland Literary competition. I wrote this story during the few weeks before Christmas last year. Although covid was still around, people were preparing for Christmas as they used to before the pandemic. The characters are people whom I passed on my morning walks; the young father with his overgrown pandemic puppy, the student with his bulging backpack, local kids with their new bikes. I have a guest suite which is often occupied. All of these things turned up in this story, even the meal I was making one day when I was writing it.

I have a guest staying, a man of some vintage, in town for a Christmas catch-up with old friends. He's the brother of my friend, Serena, who begs that he not stay in her house, nor sleep on her couch.

'Covid!' she said. 'Again! Us, not him.'

He is occupying my guest suite. I can hear him now, walking to and fro, running the tap and opening and closing the tiny refrigerator. He arrived just after four this afternoon. I showed him up the stairs and told him to make himself at home.

'Righto,' he said.

The guest is quiet now. I suppose he sank into the couch and turned on the television. I can just hear the cricket commentary. Under the agreement with Serena, her brother will give me five hundred dollars for a week's accommodation, and I will provide him with breakfast and cook a meal each evening. She gave me a list of his food intolerances, so all I can imagine is something based on rice and spinach. There is always rice in my pantry, and there is spinach in the garden. I'll also pick parsley and mint, a lemon and a couple of tomatoes.

I measure the rice and the stock. I chop the vegetables and heat some oil in the pan. I stir the onion and garlic into the oil. I read Serena's note again. She has written that her brother's name is Camden Joyce. He is a retired academic. His field of expertise is desert ecology. I add the tomatoes and keep stirring, then add the rice, the stock and the spinach. I grate some lemon zest into it. More stirring. I put the lid on and turn the flame down as low as possible.

Serena has noted that Camden won't eat from a patterned plate. She has put three exclamation points after this. I set the table with plain white crockery. I hear him coming down the stairs now – thump click, thump click. He has a silver walking stick, an aid for his reconstructed knee. He is wearing black leather shoes, a slim dark suit, white shirt and silver tie. I had imagined academics to be rather more scruffy. But not Camden Joyce.

The meal is nearly ready. I add the parsley and mint and a squeeze of lemon juice then give it one more stir. I transfer the whole pot to the board on the table and put the ladle into it. Camden can serve himself. I slice some bread and put it in a striped bowl, then, remembering Serena's exclamation points, swap it for a white bowl.

'Help yourself,' I say.

He nods a greeting and pulls the chair out. I sit at a right-angle to him at what used to be called the head of the table.

'So,' I say, 'tell me the most important thing about desert ecology.'

'Well,' he says, 'a desert has both living things and non-living things, such as the climate and the habitat. Deserts can be pretty hot and dry – or very cold and dry. Freezing even! Extreme conditions. Quite inhospitable to furry mammals, but some do make their lives there.'

He pauses to eat, the fork going in and out of his mouth. I imagine little furry mammals baking in the hot sand, gasping, their pink tongues hanging out. I tune back into the middle of a sentence.

'... vast aquifers underground.'

'So, there is water?' I say.

'Certainly, some of it is thousands of years old, or millions of years, maybe billions. If it's close to the surface, it springs forth at times, creating an oasis here and there. Ancient peoples would have dug wells to reach it, maybe up to six metres deep. Aquifers can be up to two hundred and fifty metres down. Ancient water is beneath us everywhere, not just under deserts.'

I imagine the earth beneath my floor, and the crevices among it, water trickling through and collecting in a great underground lake. Not so solid as it seems.

Camden takes some bread and tears it apart, wiping his plate with it, swallowing every crumb and every grain of rice.

'And where do the desert creatures live?' I ask.

'They have their tunnels. They bury themselves in the sand.' He stands up. 'I have some old friends to meet.'

I hand him the guest key attached to a yellow Lego man. It's Bobby's key really. I found it on the kitchen table after he left. I close my eyes briefly at that image.

Camden throws it up once, catches it, then puts it in his pocket.

'Should be back before midnight,' he says.

'Thanks for the meal, Mrs Marshall.'

I balk at the use of my married name. I haven't heard it spoken aloud for years, and then only by the police when they searched through Bobby's room.

'Call me Lou,' I say.

There is plenty of spinach-rice left over. I scrape it into a plastic container and put it in the fridge. I slosh the dishes in the sink and stack them to drain. I look again through Serena's notes. I turn the page over. There are dot-points about Camden's health profile – some issues with his heart. It occurs to me that he may suddenly die. No wonder Serena didn't want him at her place. She is far too busy to deal with a dead brother on her couch. But what about my guest suite? I imagine the paramedics navigating the narrow Victorian staircase. I phone Serena.

'So your brother has a heart condition?'

'It's under control. He has his implant. It will shock him back to life if his heart stops.'

'But you didn't want him at your house?'

'Not with covid here. It could kill him. And I'm far too busy, what with Christmas looming. Then there's his conversation. All that stuff about deserts. He's a walking talking Wiki.'

'He's not going to die then?'

'Well, probably not this week!'

The next morning I go for a walk around the neighbourhood. A coil of tinsel has appeared on a neighbour's fence. The kids next door have stuck coloured stars on all our letter boxes. The Australia Post van pulls up, doing Santa's job this year. A young man is walking a fluffy black dog. An overgrown pandemic puppy I think. A student from the share house opposite is waiting for a lift, his backpack bulging as Bobby's was the last time I saw him. I look at my feet – one two, one two, one two.

I go inside expecting to see my guest in the kitchen. I had left the pricey organic muesli on the bench and the seedy bread sliced and ready to toast. But he's not there. I listen for him upstairs, but there's not a sound. I immediately



(cont.)

THE GUEST

Rachel Flynn

Fitzroy North VIC

conclude that he has died in the guest bed. What a drama that would cause. What a mess! I go over to the stairs.

‘Mr Joyce,’ I call.

I wait for an answer, then go up the first few steps.

‘Camden ... are you awake?’

‘I am now,’ he says.

I put a load of washing on and think about the dozen nappies Bobby went through every day. My heart jumps at the memory of him as a baby – dark blue eyes, a wisp of pale hair, the corduroy teddy his grandma made him. No. I must live in the moment and avoid thinking of the past or the future. I wipe my hand across my eyes once, then again. How easily these tears still spring forth as if from an aquifer.

Camden is coming down the stairs. I wonder about the five hundred dollars he is supposed to give me. I haven’t seen it yet.

‘Morning,’ I say. ‘How did your outing go last night?’

‘Good, good,’ he says. ‘Forty-five years since we started uni together. Would you believe it?’

‘Time,’ I say, leaving out the aphorisms about how it flies and so forth. I gesture to the breakfast possibilities on the bench. ‘Help yourself.’

I turn to the coffee machine.

‘May I?’ he says, taking the coffee out of my hands.

He makes coffee and toast for both of us, then we sit at the table companionably, as if we’ve known each other for years, not just fifteen hours.

‘I’ll cook tonight,’ he says. ‘If that’s ok with you?’

‘That’s fine,’ I say.

I feel like I’m in a share house.

On Christmas morning I go for my constitutional as usual. I pass a young father pushing a double pram, a wrapped baby on one side, a toddler on the other, a long-legged puppy pulling against the lead.

‘Merry Christmas,’ he says with a slight grimace. I both envy and despair for him – envy for what he has now, despair for what the future may hold.

The kids next door wobble up the footpath on their new bikes.

When I get home I smell the coffee from the front door. Camden is in the kitchen flipping pancakes.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ he says. ‘I’ve got strawberries and yogurt to top them.’

Later, the phone rings. It’s my sister with her usual Christmas call.

‘How are you? We’re at Kelly’s. We’re all here, all eleven of us. I’ve brought the ham. And the cake. Kelly has a turkey and a rolled pork in the oven. It’s all from Aldi, even the bonbons ...’

Camden appears beside me. ‘I’m just popping out,’ he says. ‘Back in an hour.’

‘Who’s that?’ asks my sister. ‘Have you got someone there? Who is it? Is it Bobby? Has Bobby turned up? Lou?’

‘Not Bobby,’ I say. ‘I have a friend staying.’

‘Well ...’

She’s lost for words at last.

The doorbell rings just after midday. I see a box on the porch. Serena is at the gate, keeping at a sensible covid distance.

‘It’s Christmas dinner,’ she says. ‘I thought you and Cam could share it. No cooking, ready to serve.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘I wasn’t going to bother. You know me.’

She laughs. ‘Yes, I know you. It’s all within Cam’s strange dietary requirements, so don’t worry about sudden anaphylaxis or a coma.’

I nod. ‘He’s a bit ...’

‘Annoying? Yes,’ she says. ‘Sorry, but you only have three more nights, then he’ll leave.’

I unpack the box in the kitchen. Everything is in matching plastic containers with red lids. I hear the key in the lock and Camden’s steps along the hall, like he lives here. He’s talking into his mobile.

‘Thanks ... you too ... bye now...bye.’

‘That was my sister,’ he says to me. ‘She wishes Christmas upon us – upon everyone really. I see she’s delivered it.’

‘She has,’ I say.

I set the white crockery on the table and Camden takes the lids off the containers: king prawns, smoked ham, three salads, a mini-pudding with brandy custard, cherries and chocolates. We sit in our usual positions at right-angles across the corner of the table. How old these new habits seem already.

‘We must be celebrating the birth of Mithra,’ says Camden, ‘the Roman sun god. Although the Romans may have repurposed him from the Persians.’

We eat in silence for a while. I think of previous family Christmases with my sister and her lot, our parents, me and Bobby, and his father those first few years. I imagine Camden might be having nostalgic thoughts of his own. Serena had mentioned his silent daughter and his unknown grandchildren.

He turns to me. ‘You can’t stay here forever waiting for Bobby to come home.’

It jolts me. The mention of Bobby. I put my fork down.

Camden puts his hand on my arm.

‘Come and stay with me for a while?’ he says. ‘There are sights to see, even a small opera company in a repurposed church. They are about to perform Carmen.’

He describes the entire plotline to me in great detail.

‘I might come,’ I say.

‘Righto,’ he says.

SHORT STORY



THE STORIES WE TELL

Freya Cox

Blackmans Bay TAS

JUDGE'S COMMENT

Distinguished by fine imagery and rounded characterisation, this story set in a nursing home during a Covid lockdown in Tasmania reveals the crushing disparity between the freedoms of the past and the restrictions of the present with economy and flair.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am delighted to receive this award and thank the organisers of the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition for continuing to support creative writing.

Sometimes, Maria thinks, even if the rest of the world ended Tasmania would still be here. The continents could go up in flames, all the places she travelled to when she was younger vanishing off the maps, and Tasmanians would still be pottering away in their veggie gardens.

Maria sits on a chair carefully placed 1.5 meters from her great-niece Iris, on the deck attached to Maria's room in the residential care facility. (The staff always made sure to call it a residential care facility when she moved in a year ago, never a nursing home). Sliding glass doors behind them lead into Maria's room. In front of them the nursing home garden meets the carpark, which sits on a hill overlooking suburbs that stretch down to Blackmans Bay beach. The cold sun glints off Maria's glasses and a light wind stirs her short hair which remains thick despite how the colour has fled.

"You have all these stories that start with, 'once when I was in Bangkok' or 'that time I was walking around Angkor Wat' or 'when I was on Palawan Island'. I want *those* types of stories to tell," Iris says. She picks at her nailbed, a habit she picked up during grade 12 exams at the end of the previous year.

Iris has red hair framing her thin face - the bottom half currently hidden by a blue face mask - and pale skin that always burns in the Tasmanian sun. She wears a knitted green jumper with the end of the left sleeve unravelling. Maria resists the urge to tell Iris that she should fix the sleeve. She sees the tension in her great-niece's shoulders, in the repetitive tugs at the raw skin around her nailbed.

"Those were fantastic experiences, but they were also stories I brought out when I was feeling uncomfortable and wanted people to like me or men to take me seriously. You know which memories I hold closest to myself now? Ones that start with 'when I was growing up in Tasmania.'"

Iris smiles a little behind her mask. "Still. You were such an amazing journalist; I wanted the chance to see the world and learn to write about it like you."

Iris had spent the first two months of her gap year working at a fast-food pizza restaurant. Her skin constantly felt oily and daily interactions with customers left her exhausted and dispirited, wondering how people could be so passionate in their complaints about cheap pizza. But with each rude and belittling interaction she reminded herself about the second

half of the year when she would go traveling. When the lockdown had started in Tasmania she'd thought it would be over in a couple of weeks, but as it dragged on she'd seen her plans for leaving her island home dwindle.

"You will, dear. It will just take a little longer than planned. Maybe spend this time looking at our home; this is history happening right now. Sometimes the stories closest to home are the most important to write."

Iris turns to stare at the quiet suburbs rolling away down to the beach, cold waves swelling up to the sand. There are no cars on the road but on the beach tiny figures march up and down, getting in their daily exercise.

"It's just hard not to feel trapped," Iris says.

Maria nods, tells Iris that she understands, doesn't mention that these days she feels trapped in her own body, as well as in this nursing home and more recently in her own room. She spends most of the day sitting in an armchair, waiting for afternoon when the weak sun means it is just warm enough to sit on her deck overlooking the stretch of Derwent River. Then she covers her arthritic knees with a blanket and watches the sky and the river change colours like dance partners moving in tandem.

"The entire world is trapped. You might as well be trapped here. This is a bad time to be living in a major city. People packed together, coughing all over each other..."

Iris sighs. "I know. You're right." She watches the specks of seagulls and the larger ocean gulls that spiral above the river. No borders contain them. She doubts they feel the same tightening in their chests and increased heart rate that she does whenever she thinks of the future. After her gap year Iris planned to study journalism at Melbourne University. Now she watches news-presenters talk about the virus ripping through Melbourne and wonders if that plan will also drift out of sight like a passing gull.

After a moment Iris asks, "How were you really, during the months you couldn't have visitors? You never sounded great on the phone."

Iris had made regular calls to Maria at Teatree Village Residential Care Facility, but Maria struggled to hear on the phone. Iris's repeated

enquiries as to how she was managing were met with a "Fine dear, a bit bored sometimes." Or "Fine dear, it's a little lonely but we carry on."

"Tired," Maria replies now, answering the concern flecking Iris's eyes with honesty. "Turns out being by yourself all day with nothing to do is exhausting. The staff were so busy they barely had time to say hello when they came to do their work. We couldn't leave our rooms but occasionally we'd open our doors into the hallway and wave to each other. How sad, a bunch of useless oldies in our pyjamas standing along a hallway waving at each other."

"You were in your pyjamas?" Iris questions.

"Well, no, not me," Maria admits. "Others were." Every morning Maria made a point of brushing her hair and getting dressed. Even if only a harried carer saw her all day, she refused to start wearing slippers at 2pm. She viewed that as the beginning of the end.

"And that's not sad, it's nice you guys did that," Iris says.

"You hear about it spreading so quickly in aged care homes," Maria continues. "I know we're all in here expecting to die sometime soon anyway-"

"Aunt Maria! No time soon please."

"Oh, you know what I mean. It'll come sooner or later for all of us. But this virus... such a bad way to go. No family or friends able to come and say goodbye. It was scary wondering if that's the end we were waiting for."

"I know, I was scared for you too."

Maria raises a hand to her mouth as she starts to cough, forgetting the mask covering her face already does the job for her. The skin on the back of her hand is loose and wrinkly, like a glove that doesn't fit properly.

Iris feels the automatic twinge of alarm triggered by a cough or a sneeze. She looks at Maria in concern.

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

"Show me one of your photo albums?" Iris asks when Maria's coughs subside.

Maria eases herself out of the chair, her thin wrists straining as she pushes herself up. She



(cont.)

THE STORIES WE TELL

Freya Cox

Blackmans Bay TAS

shuffles back from her room holding a heavy photo album. A handwritten cover sheet on the front reads *Southeast Asia 1980-85*.

Maria places it on the table between them and moves her chair back, leaving space for Iris to come forward and open the album. Each double-page has photos stuck to it, fading writing spelling out the date and the city, sometimes alongside a cut-out news article. The article by-lines read *Maria Parson, Travel Reporter*.

Iris smiles and tilts the album up to show Maria the page she is looking at.

“Ha!” Maria cackles. “Look at that.” She points to a photo in the bottom left corner, a woman standing beside a motorbike.

“Is that you?”

“Sure is! Now I can barely get around my own room, but gosh I had a good time back in my day. On that trip I was writing about informal workers in Vietnam - street food vendors, tuk tuk drivers and so on.”

“I can’t wait for that to be me.”

“I hope you have it better than me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t easy being a female journalist then - don’t get me wrong I’m not saying it’s easy now - but gosh the crap you had to put up with - excuse my language. The harassment, men refusing to take you or your ideas seriously. At least people talk about that more now.”

Iris frowns.

“And I knew male journalists who were so gung-ho, rushing into places without a thought for their own safety, certain their skin colour, their gender and their camera would protect them. It wasn’t like that for us. You always had to be aware.”

Iris remembers a talk she attended on travel journalism in grade 12. Three balding men sat at the front and gave their advice to the crowd of eager students. When one man was asked about his tips for getting the best articles he responded, “go places alone, you’ll really get the feel of the

place that way, and if you see a crowd always go investigate what’s happening.” When someone in the audience pointed out that all three panellists were men, and asked if they had any advice for aspiring female journalists, the men looked blank and said that wasn’t really their area.

Iris turns another page in the album. There is a blurry photo of a young woman sitting at a yellow plastic table on the sidewalk, in front of a small busy restaurant. “Bangkok,” Iris reads from under the picture.

“I went to Thailand a couple of times. Covered the elections once and the increase in international tourism another time.”

“Your article on tourism isn’t in here?” Iris asks, flipping back and forth looking for it.

“No, I didn’t save that one.”

“Why not?”

Maria’s brow furrows. “Our photographer grabbed my behind when we were both in our boss’s office getting that work assignment. I was so shocked I didn’t say anything and just went to Thailand with him. My article was published with his photos.”

Iris’s hands still on the album. “I’m so sorry. That’s awful.”

“I didn’t know what else to do, how to deal with it.”

“You couldn’t tell your boss?”

Maria shakes her head. “He already thought he was being progressive enough by hiring a woman to cover Southeast Asia. He would have seen it as me creating problems and he wouldn’t have known how to address it.”

“That must have been really difficult.”

“Show me the next page,” Maria says briskly, waving her hand at the album.

Frowning, Iris turns to the next page, glancing over photos of the Grand Palace in Bangkok gleaming in the sunlight. “I still remember that heat,” Maria says. “You feel like the sun is actually punching you in the face.”

“I’d like to punch that photographer in the face,” Iris mutters.

Maria is silent for a moment. “There are articles I wish I’d written, but I didn’t feel I had the words or the audience for what I wanted to say.” She chuckles. “And I would have liked to punch him.”

“You know I’ll listen to any of your stories, right? Even the ones that aren’t glamorous and set in Bangkok.”

“I know dear.”

As if to demonstrate how far she is from Bangkok now, the wind picks up and Maria shivers in the flurry of cool air.

“I should let you get back inside,” Iris says. “I’ll come back and see you next week, okay?”

Iris leaves the residential care facility, writing her departure in the book that records all guest’s entry and exit times. She walks in the direction of her parent’s house, tucking her hands inside her jumper to ward off the breeze. The end of one sleeve is coming undone and she picks at a loose strand of wool. She has an urge to keep tugging and tugging, unravelling all the threads and letting them spin away on the breeze.

SHORT STORY



JUDGE'S COMMENT

This story set in the Sutherland Shire revisits the Cronulla riots, but with a twist. The protagonist is not a local teen from 2005, but a Muslim boy, born in that year, who is still experiencing the aftershocks of that day. The narrative voice is strong, and the sense of place is vivid and evocative.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I'm grateful to live and work on Dharawal Country, in the wonderful Sutherland Shire. I was inspired while walking around the shops and beaches in Cronulla, and passing by the Oak Park Pavilion.

'Out of the Woodwork' is a story written with love for this beautiful part of Australia, that also explores the history and tensions in the community from the Cronulla riots in 2005 and its echoes in the events of 2019.

I'm delighted to receive the Shire Resident's Prize for Out of the Woodwork. My heartfelt thanks to the Sutherland Shire Council, the Sutherland Shire Libraries, sponsors, judges, and organisers in convening the 2023 Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. As an immigrant and emerging writer, I'm honoured to receive this recognition.

OUT OF THE WOODWORK

KT Major

Jannali NSW

Samir saw them as he headed out of the surf at North Cronulla Beach. A pack of men gathered in Dunningham Park, chattering too loudly. In the middle of their circle was another man with an egg-shaped head in a navy-blue suit and bright red tie. The rest of the assembly was casually dressed for the mild autumn weather - assorted T-shirts, caps, and the occasional pair of sandals. Waiting for something.

Intrigued, Samir shouldered his orange surfboard and wiped saltwater from his eyes to get a better look.

'What are they doing?' muttered a passing local.

'That's where it happened in 2005,' whispered bystanders.

'Is that the Senator?' asked a third.

The Senator was joined by two others in military uniform, their jackets encrusted with wartime medals. The men stared defiantly at the curious onlookers. Brooking no questions, like they had every right to gather in a park, with soft grass and mottled sunlight from tall overhead trees, where children laughed in merriment at the nearby playground. Their faces were set, jaws squared. A kindling pile, ripe for a burning match.

Samir padded home, feet bare, sweating slightly in his wetsuit, thoughtful about what he'd just seen. From school, he'd learnt about what happened in 2005, the year he was born. But what were those men doing? Maybe he'd ask Mama. He dismissed the notion with a laugh. When, in his thirteen years of life, had Mama ever talked to him honestly? What came out of Amrita Khan's mouth were mostly orders: study hard, no girlfriends, help stock the shelves of their little grocer on Hungry Point Road. And a litany of complaints: the sacrifices she and Samir's dad Faiz had made to leave behind their lives in conflict-torn Kashmir. How good a life Samir had, with golden days of sun, surf and sand.

At the back entrance to Hungry Point Grocer, Samir put his surfboard on an overturned crate. Baba was upstairs in their flat, Mama pottering about the store. But Jason's blue-striped board wasn't there. Probably still out on the surf.

Samir, too, had things he couldn't be honest with Mama about. Late-night nangs, with Jason from the butcher's shop next door. They'd been careful to hide the spent cylinders of nitrous oxide in the butcher's rotten-smelling bin. Their fathers would kill them if they knew.

They had enough bad blood between them already. Once, Blaine's Butchers proudly sold Polly's Pies among its wares, famous in Cronulla, with queues stretching down the street. Made with Blaine's house-cured bacon, tender beef, and Polly's secret sauce recipe that she'd promised to teach her son Jason someday. She never did. She died six months ago from a sudden stroke.

Faiz used to march over and complain to Jason's dad Blaine, first about the queues for Polly's Pies obstructing the entrance to his grocer, then about the stench of pig's blood, putrid and unholy. On hot nights with the window open, Samir could smell the rank putrescence in his bedroom upstairs. Blaine only took more delight in hosing down his butcher's block in their shared alleyway, sending stinking water flowing over the grocer's back door.

After his mum died, Jason stepped up his use of recreational drugs, moving from nangs to durries, teaching Samir to mask pain in a cloud of smoke. In sympathy, Amrita had visited Blaine with some food and flowers. She'd found Blaine, curled up on the floor and mad with grief, talkback radio on his tinny set blaring so loudly the shop's windows rattled. She'd come home in tears, and had never mentioned what Blaine said to her that day.

For the next two weeks, whenever the boys went surfing at Shelly Beach, Jason would let Samir take the mad good waves, ones that carried him almost to shore, even though Jason had been there first. His way of saying sorry about his dad's outburst.

Inside the store, Samir found his mum dusting shelves laden with preserves.

'Mama, lots of people are gathering at Cronulla Beach,' he ventured.

Amrita looked up sharply.

'Someone said it's like 2005. Do you know what's going on?'

'Nothing that concerns you. Stop dripping water over my floor. Here, get changed, and deliver this to Nola's Cafe.' She handed Samir a basket, its contents still warm.

Sensing a gap in the pie market, Amrita had experimented with her Kashmiri curried lamb recipe and encased it in puff pastry. It became an instant hit, especially when she offered hot pies alongside groceries, delivered straight to your door.

Business-savvy Amrita always seemed to know what the people wanted. The beach-bronzed girls with colourful sarongs couldn't get enough of the grocer's bottled green smoothies, ice-cold organic goodness. Next came the demand for artisanal goods. Amrita found stockists for small-batch jams, handmade chocolates and fresh farmers' eggs. And then, she added homemade pies.

The Kashmiri lamb pies even brought the Mayor of the Shire last week, who visited with a gaggle of press in tow. Great story for the front page of the Sutherland Shire Leader about entrepreneurial Muslim immigrants, like the Khans, making good in Cronulla. Even better were the photos, with the Mayor holding thumbs up next to Amrita. With enough glowing pictures, hopefully nobody would mention what happened in 2005, a lifetime ago.

As the Mayor was leaving, Blaine emerged yelling from his shop, apron smeared red and pink, wielding something sharp and silver. Faiz had finally called the authorities about the pig's blood in the gutters. Blaine's shop had barely survived the hefty fine for unhygienic disposal of waste. And Hungry Point Grocer's newest addition to their business was simply the last straw.

The press cameras gobbled up the sight of a ranting butcher with a shopfront emblazoned with "Meat is Murder" graffiti, thanks to some hit-and-run vegan activists. The sign for Polly's Pies, once shining in LED lights, was dark and hanging askew. On the internet, the photos fuelled a different narrative, about a grieving father losing his hard-earned business to immigrant upstarts and woke know-it-alls.

Three days after the news article was published, Samir bumped into Jason at Oak Park Pavilion. Wetsuit peeled to the waist, Samir had ducked into the open-air showers with tiny taps spitting icy water. The showers were empty except for Jason, who was rinsing salt out of his dirt-blond hair.

SHORT STORY



(cont.)

OUT OF THE WOODWORK

KT Major

Jannali NSW

'Dad's furious about the pies. He says you're disrespecting Mum's memory.'

'My parents tried to talk to him.'

'I know. No one can talk to him.'

Rivulets of water from the shower had run down Jason's face like tears. He'd looked desperately sorry and alone. Samir had taken two quick steps forward, and embraced him awkwardly, acutely aware of their bare chests, holding on until the cold water overhead shuddered to a stop, old pipes groaning along the faded yellow walls. Then they'd broken apart, embarrassed. Jason had dressed swiftly and left.

That had been yesterday, recalled Samir, and they hadn't spoken since.

The delivery to Nola's Café was at Elouera Road, back near Dunningham Park. Strolling with the basket, Samir noticed that the crowd had swelled to include reporters and cameras. The Senator stood at a podium, egg-head shining under the lights. He began to speak.

He expounded on how things would change if he was reelected as Senator, sweeping his hand expansively to illustrate the significance of their location. Nobody wanted a repeat of the Cronulla riots in 2005. But the people had good reason for what happened that day, because the real problem was - and always had been - immigrants. Sudanese and Lebanese gangs, criminals of foreign nation and creed, the perpetrators always brown or black. Terrorising good people. And it'd never stop until he, as Senator, could enact his 'final solution'.

A couple of listeners started to boo, but were immediately shouted down by the pack of men surrounding the Senator.

A thin, clarion voice cut through the hubbub. A female reporter, microphone ready, with her cameraman squinting to focus his lens. 'Do you have evidence to support these claims, Senator?'

The Senator smiled. 'I don't need evidence. I know it's happening.'

'But crimes by immigrants have actually been trending downwards in this area.'

Fury broke like a rolling wave. 'You calling the Senator a liar?'

A man in baggy pants advanced upon the cameraman and pushed him to the ground. The reporter shouted in alarm, but they were soon engulfed by screaming, roaring, red faces.

Samir heard little of the fighting. He was conscious only of the visceral shame he felt, roiling in his gut. Growing up, he'd ignored the waggling eyebrows and playground mockery. Brushed away the classroom taunts about his heritage, as long as he could catch some waves after school. But today, he'd never felt so different, from the roots of his curly black hair to his rust brown skin. He needed to do something, anything.

Reaching into the basket, his hand closed around something firm. A projectile.

The egg flew from Samir's hand and hit Baggy Pants in the back of his head.

'Who did that?'

He spotted Samir. Red-handed, wielding a second egg. 'There! Right there! All the evidence you need!'

The Senator had long since disappeared, whisked away at the first sign of trouble.

As one, the mob came for Samir, lunging across the green, reaching with tattooed and muscled arms, ready to grab and smash.

Samir dropped the basket and ran, but the foremost man had already caught his shirt, ripping, tearing, snarling.

'Stop!' A blue-striped surfboard crashed into the man holding Samir. It was Jason, fresh out of the surf.

Baying, the crowd turned on the second boy, grabbing at dirt-blond hair, pushing, kicking.

'Stop!' came a second cry, panicked, nearly drowned out in the lusty shouts. 'My boy!' Was that from someone in the crowd?

'Look at you lot!' A third shout, the same clarion voice from earlier. A voice used to cutting through a busy press room. 'They're just boys.'

The reporter gazed sternly at the band of men. Beside her, the cameraman was back on his

feet, his lens aimed at the men, shreds of his black T-shirt flapping open. His elbows were bruised, but his camera hand was steady. The reporter segued into a statement, loud and clear. 'And here, we have what appears to be a pack of full-grown men attacking two boys in their early teens...'

The maddened crowd fell back, muttering, and started to retreat from the glare of the camera light. Someone ran up and helped the boys to their feet.

Samir felt his lungs expand again. The first punch had knocked the air out of him. His shirt was a sad mirror of the cameraman's, torn to bits, scratches on his chest. He turned to check on Jason. But Jason's eyes were fixed elsewhere. On the back of a man who was slinking away, but had been part of the attack seconds earlier.

'Dad?' called Jason, voice breaking. The man kept walking.

Police and medics arrived, and the boys never got a chance to speak.

The locals were horrified. 'No idea where they came from,' they told the reporter, shaking their heads. 'Definitely not from around here.'

'I reckon those men came all the way from Coniston,' said a sun-bronzed surfer.

'Look at the Khans. We welcome them in our community,' said Nola from the cafe.

SHORT STORY



JUDGE'S COMMENT

This story is a delightful meditation on how individual objects tell tales from the past and trigger fading memories. Set during a post-pandemic council pick up in the shire, the finely observed details accumulate into a portrait of a community defined by not what it holds dear, but by what it has discarded.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

'Muses of the Council Pickup' was inspired by my love of Greek Mythology. It is an reimagining of the street where I live in Sutherland, taking actual experiences and conversations that occurred during various council hard rubbish pickups, and imagining how the Greek Muses, might experience this very human activity. I enjoyed playing with the names, Mrs D (Demeter) and her daughter Steph (Persephone), the muses Clio and Thalia, Theo (Zeus) and Hemmes (Hermes) the messenger god with the broken computer. The theme of the 2023 competition was "Emerging" and the council pickup is a community ritual that always draws our little neighbourhood out onto the street.

MUSES OF THE COUNCIL PICKUP

Jacinta Frawley Werger

Sutherland NSW

"Well, you said you were going to clean up and you really did," my neighbour Clio says. "Yes, I really did!" I say, nodding proudly. I am standing in the middle of the street admiring a pile of crumpled boxes, several sets of shelves, an old bed, past Christmas decorations, a particularly tasteless selection of second-hand curtains from various past houses, a broken vacuum cleaner and a working organ, a never-used rescue from a previous council pickup.

"I like your couch," I say to Clio whose head and feet I can see peeking out over each end of a rather scuffed beige sofa, which has been plonked haphazardly amidst an impressive pile of household junk on the street verge. The back of the sofa is turned toward the street hiding most of her from view and she reclines like an ancient goddess as we discuss the council pickup. She is amazed that there is always so much to be collected every six months. "What is it with humans and stuff! Where does it all come from?" Clio laughs.

For my part I wonder where everything hid before it appeared overnight on the footpath. Were these piles in back gardens everywhere? After all, items selected for the council pickup need thought. These objects were clearly not in use yesterday. This is no impulsive discarding. The old bathroom vanities, broken mirrors, rusted watering cans, no-longer-beloved toys, garden pots, kitchen pans, and broken sporting equipment have clearly been rejected for some time. These are the items deemed inadequate for a charity shop, or a garage sale. No friend or family could be found to take them. Not worthy enough for a natural disaster victim or aid agency, nothing here shouts "keep me for that school project, dress up day, fancy dress party, I can be turned into street art!"

I wonder about the now empty garages and corners of sheds, the under-house and attic spaces which held these items in limbo between when they were useful and when they became refuse. What must it feel like to rest in a corner, in transition from being useful, to "not sure about that", to being selected for the council pickup. Are these hidden corner spaces now empty or are they filling up again already? Clio and I wander down the street mentally picking over the debris. To touch anything seems to go too far and imply desire or an assertion of potential ownership that is at odds with my new-found minimalism. From experience I know that if I were to touch anything it would claim me, and I would be obliged to offer it a new home.

A few houses down we arrive at Thalia's. She is putting out piles of plants though she knows that the council will not take green waste today. Instead, she is hopeful that the council pickup, which always draws people onto the street, will encourage passers-by to take her excess plants. A talented gardener, she sets them free to find their own new homes.

It is an unusual coincidence that several neighbours in our two little cul-de-sacs have pickups booked for today. We speculate that the Council must have much to do now that every shelf and cupboard in the Shire has been sorted, culled, and reimagined at least three times in the last two covid years and we reminisce about old times when the wider area shared the same allocated pick-up date. Every six months was a little festival as we all emerged onto the street carrying what had once been precious.

"Do you remember when the kids were little, and they all pushed each other up and down the street in that old yellow suitcase with the wobbly wheels?" asks Thalia.

"Or the time that my kids tried to carry home Hemme's old monitor and dropped it," adds Clio. "Glass everywhere!"

"Or when it poured and poured that week, and everything turned to mush," I grimace.

"What's all this cackling I hear ladies", booms Theo from an upstairs window. "No cackling, we are musing on the Council pickup!"

"A favour, if I may, can I add to the pile?" he shouts, holding up a familiar box to the window.

When he comes down, we see it still contains the remains of the Hornby Ave library that Theo and his family sheltered on their front porch when the Shire libraries were closed. We say goodbye to the battered books, jigsaws, and games. They bear the scars of having passed through many hands, sanitized and not, and their work is done.

I think about the life in these once-valued possessions, no longer useful for their original purpose but not yet finding a new life as recycling, landfill, compost, or fuel for a power station. But the neighbourhood is being transformed. For yesterday we were hiding these objects, perhaps even ashamed of our

bad taste, cheap furniture, or tacky belongings. Yet here we are now, placing our discarded history into the open, on display for our neighbours to assess, pick over, and judge. Just as we will do to them in our turn.

I notice over the years who does and does not put anything out for the council pickup. New arrivals, renovators, those preparing to sell, and families all shed their belongings regularly. These are dynamic households in movement and transition. My elderly neighbours seem to have less to discard. Have they already with each departure of a child, death of a spouse, or retirement shed all they need to shed? They seem comforted and comfortable, familiarity continuing to infuse their possessions with memories. Perhaps they are leaving the final sorting to others.

During a break in the covid lockdowns when Mrs D passed, her daughter Steph invited the neighbourhood to take anything we might need. I knew Mrs D to be a fastidious housekeeper, and I was amazed at how much Steph could offer us. Original residents in the street, Mr and Mrs D had built their cottage 70 years ago as newlyweds. When Steph revealed the stores of crockery, jars, tools, and household history that had lived in the unused bedrooms, she told us that her parents had been frugal and talented at repurposing and upcycling long before it became fashionable. Like many older people in the street, they had been keen composters, picklers, jam-makers, gardeners and "fixer-uppers". Wearing her mother's home-made clothes had been the norm for Steph growing up in the 60s. But Mr D passed before we ever knew him, and Mrs D had been a widow decades longer than she had been a wife. As a group we sat socially distanced along the street toasting Mrs D while Steph told of her mum losing the energy to sort and discard once her dad had gone and so the house filled and filled with the past. Most of us were glad to take something, not that we needed anything, except a connection to the pioneers of our little street.

I think of the piles of old letters, photos, birthday cards, children's art, and family memories tossed into boxes at home, perching alongside the dainty inherited crockery and crystal ware, so gorgeously impractical yet survivors from my parents' wedding over sixty

*(cont.)*

MUSES OF THE COUNCIL PICKUP

Jacinta Frawley Werger

Sutherland NSW

years ago. Such preciousness will always have a place in our home.

The soccer boots and shin pads, hats and handbags abandoned in the hallway are not destined for the pickup either as they can be called back into life at any moment. The little piles of pens, hair clips, coins, and half scribbled notes gathered on the kitchen bench will be scattered again and again through the house and used many times before their usefulness is done.

A rough engine whine draws me back to the three of us standing in the warm dusk. The small white ute cruises slowly around the corner. A wizened face leans out of the window and asks if “you luvs mind me taking a look”. We turn to each other and shrug. “But not the plants” says Thalia. “At least he asked”, Clio mutters and I shrug again. Some of the neighbours would say no, “what is put out for the council, should be collected by the council” they say, but I am grateful for anything and everything to be reused and recycled. Scavenging can be a noble art.

Returning home, I feel a little less concerned to sort and discard, as I know there will be other council pickups. Clio and I have made ourselves and Thalia happy by taking some of her plants which, like the soccer boots in the hallway and the many things scavenged for many different reasons from the street, have been reprieved this time around. I even gather one of my own discarded books from Theo’s box. A souvenir of when we stayed close to home, my heart cannot part with it after all.

Perhaps this is always the hidden boon of the council pickup. Our street community is enlivened, we have sorted and brought broken and discarded parts of ourselves, our rubbish, into the light of day and see that there is no shame in it. Our neighbours are like us, and we are like our neighbours. Cut off from each other for so long, the council pickup beckons us to show ourselves. After sheltering in our homes, we can now emerge and pick up some wisdom, some counsel for our community and ourselves.

Older, wiser, and tidier—at least until the next council pickup.



2021 LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS

TRADITIONAL VERSE Prize Winners

First Prize
The Difficult Poem -
Jennifer Harrison, Melbourne VIC

Second Prize
Ghosts within a Tempest -
Kay Gorrington, Morayfield QLD

1st Shire Resident's Prize
My Cathedral -
Jan Motbey, Kurnell NSW

FREE VERSE Prize Winners

First Prize
Sunday in Surfers -
David Terelinck, Biggera Waters QLD

Second Prize
Home Christmas -
Margaret Clark, Riverview NSW

1st Shire Resident's Prize
The Housing Commission Flat -
Mark Best, Sutherland NSW

2nd Shire Resident's Prize
Fragments -
Felicity Conneely, Caringbah NSW

SHORT STORIES Prize Winners

First Prize
The Walkers -
Freya Cox, Turner ACT

Second Prize
Hot in Two Ways -
Jean Flynn, Ballarat North VIC

1st Shire Resident's Prize
Bob's on the Job -
Margaret Harris, Gymea Bay NSW

2nd Shire Resident's Prize
The Bard of the Bonnet, Henry Lawson -
Leone McManus, Como NSW

Highly Commended
All I Want -
Jean Flynn, Ballarat North VIC

Highly Commended
In the Small House with the Big Walls -
Matthew Querczoli, Cronulla NSW



Convenient Shopping

Coles
Woolworths
Kmart (open 24 hours),
Plus over 50 specialty stores
FREE Parking



Cnr Princes Highway & Port Hacking Road, Sylvania
southgatesylvania.com.au [southgatesylvania](https://www.facebook.com/southgatesylvania)

FREE EBOOKS, AUDIOBOOKS AND MORE! AT YOUR LIBRARY



SUTHERLANDSHIRE
LIBRARIES



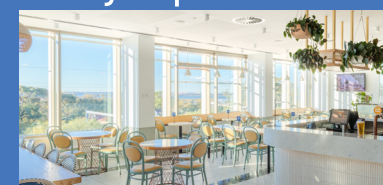
Stunning Private Events



Great Food & Drinks



Play Space & Kids Parties



Tradies
CARLINGBAH
28-30 Banksia Road
www.tradies.com.au



Read the winning entries and judges' comments for previous competitions at
sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au/literarycompetition



We can assist you in:

COMMERCIAL

PROPERTY

FAMILY

ESTATE

CRIMINAL

Call our office on 9525 8966 to receive a
complimentary phone consultation



Sutherland Shire
**LITERARY
COMPETITION**

2023

