



Sutherland Shire
LITERARY
COMPETITION

2018

SUTHERLAND SHIRE



SUTHERLANDSHIRE





MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

The presentation of prizes in Sutherland Shire's first Literary Competition is the culmination of a vision to nurture, promote and celebrate literary creativity in Sutherland Shire and build on the love of literature and reading fostered by our Shire libraries. The competition encourages local writers and showcases their talents, as well as promoting Sutherland Shire to the nation.

In May 2017 Sutherland Shire Council endorsed the formation of a Literary Competition Sub-Committee comprising three Sutherland Shire councillors, Barry Collier OAM, Tom Croucher and Michael Forshaw to consider the establishment of a literary competition. In November 2017 Council unanimously approved the establishment of the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition following extensive research and consultation with local writing groups, recognised writers, judges, academics and national competition organisers. The competition was coordinated by Sutherland Shire Libraries.

The nationwide competition ran from 5 February to 30 April 2018 and sought entries in 3 literary categories: traditional (rhyming) poetry, free verse poetry and short story. Attractive prize money was offered in each category thanks to the generous sponsorship of Tradies, the University of Wollongong and Moran Aged Care. To encourage entries from local writers a Shire Resident's Prize was made available in each of the three competition categories.

Council was fortunate to secure the services of experienced judges: well-known, national award-winning poet, Mr David Campbell and award-winning short story writer and academic, Ms Claire Corbett. I would like to thank this year's judges for the hours spent considering hundreds of entries and for their valued expert commentary.

The inaugural 2018 Sutherland Shire Literary Competition attracted submissions from every State and Territory in Australia. A total of 581 entries were received: 346 in the poetry sections and 235 in the short story section. Significantly, and confirming the perceived need to acknowledge local literary talent, 44% of entries were submitted by residents of Sutherland Shire.

Sutherland Shire Council thanks our local literary groups—the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Sutherland), the Sutherland Shire Writing Group and the Cronulla Writing Group—for their input and enthusiastic support.

I thank members of Council's working party and Council's library staff for their hard work in bringing this Competition to life.

Council especially thanks internationally recognised author Kathy Lette for attending our Presentation event. Kathy grew up in Sutherland Shire and her presence at the event will be a great encouragement to all writers present.

Finally, I congratulate the prize-winners and thank the many entrants from across Australia for their contribution in making the inaugural Sutherland Shire Literary Competition such a success.

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Sutherland Shire Literary Competition
Publication

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LIST OF WINNERS

TRADITIONAL VERSE

Prize Winners

First Prize	Jack, My Friend – Shelley Hansen, Maryborough Qld
Second Prize	Two Families Who Never Met – Robyn Sykes, Binalong NSW
Third Prize	Too Ancient to Bleed – Brenda-Joy Pritchard, Charters Towers Qld
Shire Resident's Prize	The Last Wave – Ann O'Connor, GyMEA NSW
Highly Commended	She-Ode to the Wind – Malcolm Beveridge, North Lakes Qld
Highly Commended	The Price of Beer – Jacqueline Winn, Possum Brush NSW
Highly Commended	From Gallipoli with Love – Tom McIlveen, Port Macquarie NSW

FREE VERSE

Prize Winners

First Prize	Nothing Much Here – Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW
Second Prize	How to Write a Waterfall – Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW
Third Prize	Spirits of the Land – John Minnery, Kelvin Grove Qld
Shire Resident's Prize	Ancient – Tee Linden, Sutherland NSW
Highly Commended	Turning by Degrees – Jenny Pollak, Mackerel Beach NSW
Highly Commended	Dance of the Cranes – Joyce Noble, Engadine NSW

SHORT STORIES

Prize Winners

First Prize	The Escapist – Alexander Tobal, Roleystone WA
Second Prize	The Jam Tim – Mark Scott, Gladesville NSW
Third Prize	Soles – Carla Fitzgerald, Como NSW
Shire Resident's Prize	Shazza's Sheep – Tee Linden, Sutherland NSW
Highly Commended	The Lady Vanishes – Catherine Moat, Lake Munmorah NSW
Highly Commended	A Man Digs a Grave – Jacqueline Winn, Possum Brush NSW
Highly Commended	Ray – Guy Salvidge, Northam WA
Highly Commended	Invasive Species – Morgan Nunan, Montmorency Vic
Highly Commended	What I Want You to Know – Kristin Murdock, Warooka SA
Highly Commended	The Flow – Margaret Linley, Geelong Vic

TRADITIONAL VERSE



JUDGE'S COMMENT

Suicide is a difficult topic to write about, but here is a poem that tackles it sensitively yet powerfully. It is a story that carries a message, both for those suffering from depression and the friends and family who support them. The structure is not conventional, and yet the poet is always in command of both metre and rhyme, managing to meet the added challenge of carrying one rhyme through the first line of each stanza in the poem. Those unsure about 'good rhyme and metre' should study a poem like this to see how it can be done well.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am honoured and delighted to accept this award, especially as my poem centres on such an important subject. Like most of us, I've lost friends to suicide, and I welcome the opportunity to increase awareness of this troubling issue through my writing. Heartfelt thanks to the competition organisers, judges and Sutherland Shire for their support of Australian poets. Having opportunities such as this to showcase our work is very much appreciated.

JACK, MY FRIEND

Shelley Hansen

Maryborough Qld

'Remember,' said my sister Jan, 'the boys who lived next door –
our ginger-headed playmates – Jack and Jed?'

I saw her features alter –

her words began to falter ...

'I hate to break the news – but Jacko's dead.'

'How awful, Jan! Just thirty – he would not be any more,'

I said. 'How come he passed away so young?'

The next words I was hearing

were just what I'd been fearing ...

'He killed himself.' And then she added, 'Hung!'

At once the scene receded as I thought of how we four
could hardly wait for Saturday to play

bright games of backyard cricket –

the dustbin for a wicket,

or sometimes we would fly our kites all day!

And Jacko was the one who had us rolling on the floor
with laughter. He would always play the clown.

And yet I had an inkling

behind those eyes so twinkling

a secret sorrow festered deeper down.

Old Henry Jones the grocer died – he owned our corner store.
We stood beside his grave and wished him peace.

Then Jacko said, 'This dying –

should never cause such crying.

It seems to me to be a sweet release.'

It worried me to see the strange expression that he wore.
His gaze absorbed a vision far away.

But how could I be knowing

the darkness that was growing

and moulding his resolve like potter's clay?

Back then I didn't understand depression's
burning core –

dismissing it as just a 'bout of blues'.

I knew it pulled him under

but didn't stop to wonder

just how it felt to walk in Jacko's shoes.

The seasons flew and new directions swept the
paths of yore

aside, as we established our careers.

Though Jack was bright and clever

and studied hard, he never

could seem to leave behind his childhood
years.

Part-sage, part-wistful elf, like Peter Pan of fairy
lore,

he drifted and just couldn't seem to rest.

But now and then I'd meet him

and take the time to greet him.

One day he broke his silence and confessed ...

'Some days my life is beautiful. My spirit
seems to soar

like rays of light that leap to kiss the sky.

Then, swallowed up by sorrow

that's when I fear tomorrow.

Don't ask me to explain. I don't know why.

They've tried to help with therapy. I've
swallowed pills galore

with side effects that border on bizarre.

I've weathered their intrusion,

but come to the conclusion

we're better off just being who we are.'

He must have felt so lonely as he waged his
inner war

unseen behind the brightness of the smile

that made him loved by many

with no idea that any

dark demons dogged his footsteps, mile for
mile.

I wished that I could turn back time, to
capture and restore

a snapshot of the days we left behind.

but then I thought – reliving

would be so unforgiving

for Jack, in search of peace he could not
find.

We're often quick to judge and to apply a
common law

to how we think that others should behave

and see the world around us.

Then, what it takes to ground us

can come too late to save some from the
grave.

The years have passed. The loss of Jack
encouraged me to pour

my studies into mental health to gain

the best of all my chances

to try to find some answers

so Jack, my friend, may not have died in vain.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



TWO FAMILIES WHO NEVER MET

Robyn Sykes

Binalong NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This is another poem that deals with death, but death balanced by the corresponding gift of life. Again the layout is unusual, with alternate stanzas following a different story, each with its own particular structure, but always with the poet's steady hand in control. And at the end the two stories come together in a thought-provoking yet satisfying conclusion.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I'm delighted to be placed second in such a prestigious competition. Thank you to the people of Sutherland for your support of literary endeavours. The Sutherland Shire Literary Competition burst onto the literary calendar this year, offering a terrific opportunity for poets to test their skills. All credit to the organisers for their vision.

The siren screams curses, my lungs gasp for air:
my wife has been struck by a truck.
Hail Mary, Our Father, which way is she? Where?
Oh Suzie my mind's come unstuck.

Our son lies still, fatigued and yellow, poisoned liver
battle-
scarred, but Mike still smiles each day.
His skin is paper, arms are needles, breath a wheezy
rattle-
rasp. The rector comes to pray.

I smell antiseptic and taste it as fear;
my voice squeaks like shoes on the floor.
A white-lipped young doctor draws awkwardly near.
Our kids arrive, creaming the door.

The homestead's now a clinic ward, its brick walls are a
prison
cell. Our friends all rally round
with casseroles and roasted lamb and sponge cakes
light and risen
high. His mates bring laughter's sound.

'She's not going to make it,' I hear through my trance.
My ears close, I don't want to know.
'Her organs perhaps could give others a chance.'
He's wrong. No, I won't let her go.

Thank God the season stuck with us,
the sheep and cattle flourished
well. A neighbour sowed the wheat.
Mike's lucerne pastures, wind-break
trees and dreams he daily nourished
stand neglected, incomplete.

My knuckles turn white. I forget to exhale.
How peaceful she looks, sound asleep.
For time is the lace in a treacherous veil:
what's missing can make us all weep.

By day we talk of transplants, but at
night, when faith is shimmer-
thin, I nag my hubby dumb.
We check the phone, recheck it, for
the dial tone gives a glimmer-
hope. Mike's bag is packed. I'm numb.

I think of our home on the cliff by the sea;
our wedding day framed on the wall;
her perfumed pink roses, the gulls she sets
free;
the chatter when chums come to call.

Old Tiger's kennel's empty: as I
watched his eyes grow older-
sad, I let him in the house.
An armchair by the bedside and a
thin hand on his shoulder-
blade: I never have to rouse.

My daughter says 'Dad, we all know what
Mum said:
'It's better to give than receive'.
We've one final option to see her love
spread.
Six people could gain a reprieve.'

'Hello. I'm from St Vincent's. Can you
come? We've got a donor
ready.' Time's on ice. I freeze.
My throat's the Simpson Desert...
Mike is saved ... the liver's owner...
How? What pain resolves my pleas?

I can't bear the emptiness yawning like tar.
I can't bear the Suzie-sized hole.
I can't bear the shreds of my life and the scar.
Don't tell me the gifts soothe my soul.

Old Tiger woofs and wags his tail, the
wind-break's gold with wattle-
dust. Mike's baling lucerne hay.
His face is pink, his shoulders strong,
his future planned full throttle-
blast. Each day, in thanks, I pray.

O Suzie, I'll never forget how we lay
entwined like wisteria vines;
the smell of your hair, how we'd laugh and
we'd play.
You shine now in six breathing shrines.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



TOO ANCIENT TO BLEED

Brenda-Joy Pritchard

Charters Towers Qld

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This is a more conventional poem in terms of content as, using Gilgandra's Coo-ee March for inspiration, it deals with the horrors of war. But the structure makes it stand out, with the double use of the word 'bleed' in the fourth and eighth lines of each stanza hammering home a strong message about the terrible aftermath of war.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am delighted to be the recipient of third prize in the inaugural Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. As an individual and as Promotions Officer for the Australian Bush Poets Association, I thank all concerned with the conception and organisation of this new competition on the traditional rhyming verse calendar. Also thank you to the sponsors and Sutherland Shire Council for the very generous allocation of prize monies.

Ghost of a 'Coo-ee' one hundred years on,
wandering spectre of ages long gone,
looking at life through my transcendent eyes –
endlessly destined to bleed.
Thoughts stalk the labyrinth eons of mind,
lost in a limbo, unable to find
rest from the chaos of Earth's battle cries –
watching descendants still bleed.

After Gallipoli's heart-rending pain,
we rallied round to the Coo-ee refrain
leaving behind all the joys of our youth –
wife, bearing-child, left to bleed.
Nineteen fifteen, '...war to end all the wars',
we were infused with the Coo-ee March cause;
we were the patriots fighting for truth –
willingly forging to bleed.

Lads volunteering to serve and obey
anxious to join in the Empire's assay,
filled with belief that our purpose was right –
not knowing how we would bleed.
We fought the stench with each gas-laden breath,
wallowed with rats while surrounded by death
wailed with the agony, froze up in fright –
buried in trenches to bleed.

Son of my fruitfulness, I never saw,
grew up to fight in a Second World War,
filled with the faith of his dead father's dreams –
one among millions to bleed.

Chaos and turbulence, blood staining years,
men, just past boyhood, enmeshed in their fears,
suffering battlefield's cruel extremes –
grandchildren orphaned to bleed.

Son of my son found the Vietnam war,
camouflage tactics not known of before,
different horrors but still the same curse –
youth sent on missions to bleed.

One more descendant had died a young man.
Next call to arms was in Afghanistan.
Death did not come but perhaps even worse –
all of his lifetime to bleed.

Father returned from the desert-scape Hell,
haunted by nightmares too cruel to tell,
caught in the turmoil of sanity's loss –
wife and son share in the bleed.

Five generations of lads of the land
fighting in conflicts they don't understand,
crucified youth on a false Southern Cross –
causing our loved ones to bleed.

Tragic account of my o-springs' descent,
mothers and orphaned boys left to lament,
surely it's time for an end to the fights. –
'Challenge the order to bleed!'

Too many crosses on too many graves,
too many heroes that history saves,
too many killings for each nation's rights –
'Please put an end to the bleed!'

'Must it pass on to the children just born –
blood-stained inheritance, love left to mourn?
What have we gained for the sacrifice made?
Must we continue to bleed?'

Lifetimes of slaughter and warring must cease.
I cannot leave till my seed is at peace.
Spirit of youth from the Coo-ee brigade –
I am too ancient to bleed.

TRADITIONAL VERSE



THE LAST WAVE

Ann O'Connor

Gymea NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This, like Jack, My Friend, is a contemplation on suicide, but from a different perspective: "Why should I not just die?" The poet, deftly using the sea as both setting and metaphor, takes us into the mind of a woman who, wracked by a combination of anger, guilt and doubt, faces her demons.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am very pleased as it expresses my feelings about the Shire and its seashore when I arrived in the area a few years ago. I live in Gymea and as an ex-Londoner I love the feeling of being surrounded by beaches and bays but am aware of the dangers and sadness they can bring as well as the joys.

The sea rolled in with force and power
Along the rugged shore.
The day was mixed with sun and shower
As time relentless bore.

Alone and lonely on the sand
A stick-like figure stood
With clammy skin and shaking hand
Expression still as wood.

Horizon-seeking eyes were dark
And questioning the sky.
The options clear, the future stark.
'Why should I not just die?'

And slowly taking off her shirt
She neatly stacked the pile.
And layer by layer peeled off the hurt
And forced a twisted smile.

'Now let them know what I've been through
And in my agony share
And feel the pain and suffering, too
When friends no longer care.'

The beach was scrubbed and scoured till clean,
Churned by the outgoing tide.
The turmoil raging there unseen
Was fierce as mates who lied.

And step by step, she made her way
Towards the hidden rocks
Whose presence, shown by spit and spray,
The safety flag it mocks.

And slowly, as she felt the cold
Sea-water on her feet,
The thrill of fear as sand unrolled
And set her heart abeat.

She knew that she could not go on
And slide into the sea.
A coward's mantle she must don
And never would be free.

But back and forth she would be drawn
Like tides along the beach.
By friends and foe she would be torn
As shore she tried to reach.

And as the sea is never still
She too would ebb and flow.
Despite her strong and steadfast will
Her journey would be slow.

But now she knew that she was strong,
Relentless as the sea.
The final wave to doubt was long.
A fighter she would be.

FREE VERSE



NOTHING MUCH HERE

Penny Lane

Nelson Bay NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This is a movingly nostalgic tribute to Farina, now a ghost-town (almost) in the middle of the South Australian outback. There were once hopes of it becoming a thriving centre of wheat and barley crops, but lack of rain killed that dream. So here the poet evokes the spirit of the present compared to the past with a series of detailed, cleverly constructed cameos that recreate the landscape and people of a small, isolated country town.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am astonished and delighted at winning. I have been writing poetry for three years and enter an occasional poem in a competition as a means of getting feedback. This time I decided to enter two poems, fingers crossed one might be short-listed. This would be a way of finding out which of the two is judged to be better than the other. Hence my astonishment at the success of both my poems. Poetry is an important aspect of my life, both reading and writing it, so the pleasure I have in knowing I am writing worthy poems is deep.

Nothing much here but dirt, grey grass stubble
and gravelly stones to kick; nothing much to do
but watch a feather-fluffed kestrel unsteady-legged
on a wind-tottering, rotting fence post;

nothing much here but earth reclaiming its geology,
rubbled street remnants, stones from crumbled structures,
a once-town reduced to these and sepia memories:
on sand-flecked information boards, old photographs

of Farina, desert town conceived by imaginings
of fields of wheat and barley, and born into
dreams of bakeries and air misted with Farina flour,
not the dust canopying an isolation of struggling gums;

nothing much growing here but sour-taste paddy melons,
once used for shooting targets by Mrs Elizabeth Chapman
chubbied by coat and hat, gun-toting from her T-model Ford,
while Muriel Chapman played tennis on salt-pan courts;

nothing much here to do but scu up pu's of dirt,
track a gravel-straddling trail of ants, or watch
a coming dust storm erase the sky with dirty smudges
like a classroom rubber in a child's ground-grubby hand,

the hand of a child born long ago into optimism
and the clutch of Mrs Moatt the midwife
sterilised and starched into her sti white pinafore
for delivering local babies and sometimes a lamb or calf;

nothing much here but drought-thwarted dreams,
no wheat fields but rebirth into a now-gone service town
umbilical-corded with camel and railway tracks
travelling through decades into abandonment and neglect;

nothing much here but attempts to restage the town
with rebuilt walls and rusted relics—railway realia,
farming implements, cooking pots, camel saddle straps—
amid the cumulonimbus gatherings of dust;

these the only clouds, and no water here now,
little enough then for weekly shared family baths,
girls first, others in turn in water carried here by rail
and heated by burning scarce and scarcer wood;

no wood here now, no Mr Moatt, blacksmith,
no camels carrying heavy loads—a grand piano once,
no New Year's Day Races, no Race Day Ball,
only massive sand drifts and the buried skeleton of once-were streets;

nothing much here but a dust squall
chasing fence-wire tumbleweeds and a family of emus,
feather-smothered stick-like apparitions, skittering through
the cemetery of dearly beloveds and never forgottens;

nothing much here but fenced and headstoned memories:
Charles and Elizabeth Chapman, loved father and mother,
Robert Moatt, blacksmith, in memoriam,
Mrs Moatt's headstone missing from the family plot

like all the once-were residents now seemingly blown away
in a dust storm as was the occasional dunny back then;
nothing much here now but history leached of life and colour
amid the dirt, gravel and grey grass stubble.

FREE VERSE



HOW TO WRITE A WATERFALL

Penny Lane
Nelson Bay NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

How would you describe a waterfall? What words would you use? Here is an ingenious, imaginative answer to that question in a relatively short poem which uses the essential elements of language to achieve the desired effect. I can do no better than quote an example: 'pen a plummet, a plunge of / vowels and consonants of / diphthongs and digraphs falling / and frothing from white-inked words - / moist bursting its air bubble into mist'. That last line is one reason I describe the poem as 'ingenious'.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am astonished and delighted at winning. I have been writing poetry for three years and enter an occasional poem in a competition as a means of getting feedback. This time I decided to enter two poems, fingers crossed one might be short-listed. This would be a way of finding out which of the two is judged to be better than the other. Hence my astonishment at the success of both my poems. Poetry is an important aspect of my life, both reading and writing it, so the pleasure I have in knowing I am writing worthy poems is deep.

Hesitate over a rocky beginning, a precipice of intention, then shape a solid wall horizontally lined by calligraphic fissures, its layers a waiting page, black lines on brown, and portrait-oriented; feed it a stream of words to ink the page with white, with word-spill smudged with green-ink mosses, bracketed by trees, by ferns, by forest litter scribbled as a fluster of rapid notes; pen a plummet, a plunge of vowels and consonants, of diphthongs and digraphs falling and frothing from white-inked words—moist bursting its air bubble into mist repeatedly from question-marked cascades over rocky ledges, other words spurting into a sibilance of phonetics, then tumbling into a surge of words re-forming or cast as vapour-spray to spangle spider silk in strings of o's or splash on fallen rocks like balled discarded paper scrawled with lost words; end with an expression of exclamation marks dissolving into a splatter of full stops on the surface of a shallow pool.

FREE VERSE



SPIRITS OF THE LAND

John Minnery
Kelvin Grove Qld

JUDGE'S COMMENT

Once again we are dealing with aspects of the landscape, this time attacking those who would exploit it unscrupulously for gain. The 'Spirits' are those of bushfire, flood and storm, waiting in eager anticipation to defeat our futile attempts to construct communities in inappropriate places. The language is simple yet the message is powerful, even if it's a lesson soon forgotten...as the Spirits wait.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

Thank you very much to your Council for the award. And congratulations to Sutherland Shire for its support of creative writing. It is hugely exciting to see an innovative local council getting behind local writers in this way. I'm especially thrilled to be awarded a prize as I have recently retired and poetry is a new direction for me. To mess with a well-known metaphor, I think the Shire's support helps show that mature quolls can indeed change their spots.

When a salesman extols the spread bush vista but hides the risks he knows it hides; when tree-changing townies naïvely claim peace found amidst the tumbled trees; when devious developers clear land to flog as rare arcadia; then the Spirit of Bushfires licks dry lips, recalling the tang of charred dead dry gums, reminded of bright red roiling fire-feasts. And waits.

When a speculator lies to council her swampy fields are safe and dry; or that minor changes to housing lots will divert floods from bright new homes; or past mistakes are again repeated with once-drowned homes rebuilt in place; then the Spirit of River Floods squirms with delight, its fearsome force hid in shifting wet shape. It tastes again surging eddies of mud. And waits.

When mangrove flats are charmingly moulded into costly coastal havens; when sheltering front dunes are bulldozed and transformed to tawdry glitter-piles that copy myriad other worn-out thrills, and mansions squat on fragile coasts; the Storm Spirit licks its salty fingers, and tastes again the wave-washed wind-flecked foam. It remembers the helpless drowning land. And waits.

When each inquest into each disaster repeats lessons all soon forgot; when 'resilient' responses repeat mistakes over and yet over again; when victims forget so newcomers aren't told of pain, of death and damage; whilst riches reward greed and pamper power, the patient hungry Spirits of the Land know their time for feasting will come again. So they wait.

FREE VERSE



ANCIENT

Tee Linden

Sutherland NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

This is a richly evocative piece of writing that depicts the awakening of 'she', the 'old god' of the earth whose 'heartbeat floods the muddy riverbanks / arteries thread the bush like rushing ribbons / snaking out to the frothing canopy of the sea'. And yet the 'ancient mother glory' is 'obscured through the looking glass modernism' which she can't see because the damage is not her doing. So 'she' (in an echo of Spirits of the Land), assaulted by these 'buried crumbs of children', stirs into life.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I've lived in the Shire my whole life and was pleased to be able to enter the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. I'm thrilled to receive the Shire Resident's Prize and hope this competition continues in future, to support locals and encourage Shire literary interest.

she wakes from an eon of dirt slumber

the everywhere temple is shrouded in blue eucalyptus fog

cicadas sing sacred in the fractal shells of her ears

her bare skin blooms with cottony yellow wattle

soft as baby kingfisher bellies

blossoms swelling, mouths seeking, open,

to drink from the dawn that she draws

her heartbeat floods the muddy riverbanks

arteries thread the bush like rushing ribbons

snaking out to the frothing canopy of the sea

her hair is plaited around her crown

paperbark shards, fibrous throat-singing chimes,

rough amongst the spiralling night-time galaxies of her curls

her toes ringed red with dry and crumbled earth

feet that seeded all the forests and the grasses as

she walked the curvature of the womb

chin held high, shoulders squared into the storm

tree-cracking lightning laughter with

eyes shiny and sharp as attacking corvid beaks

fire ants scurry her topography, shiny heads bowed

at the blood they feel beneath volcanic skin

that once filled every dry busted pod on the forest floor

they know her elegant fingers stretched the trees

from their very first roots, as she moves, limbs

gently whispering against clinging crisped cicada shells

the old god rests in solitude

between the

dens of trapdoor spiders

between the

roads cut white-dusty through the bush

all hidden trails lead to her

to the ancient mother glory

obscured through the looking glass modernism

her eyes can't see the outnumbering intrusion

because this is not her destruction

these consuming, violent husks

these buried crumbs of children

they cannot out-exist her

she gathers all the infinite parts of her,

humid with their damage and

she stands

SHORT STORIES

1ST
PRIZE

JUDGE'S COMMENT

A man, Sanjeev, tears himself away from a computer game or virtual reality to do his job, even when he doesn't have to, and all else in the tale flows from that: connection to a lonely AI and the challenges of the outside world. The achievement of this story is that it takes one incident and through it illuminates the challenges we are facing as an entire species: survival in and connection with the natural world and connection to each other rather than immersion in screens and private fantasy worlds. While set in the near future, like all science fiction and speculative fiction this story is about our hopes and fears and problems right now. In a quiet and moving way this story builds up a picture of what is happening now and where it could lead without being didactic or losing connection to or sympathy with its characters. There is a lightness of touch and humour reminiscent of Douglas Adams' work. It does what only fiction can do: lets us experience other worlds, places and times.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

First and foremost: my utmost thanks to everybody involved for both the opportunity and award. I consider myself an amateur futurist, and find nothing more fascinating than explorations into the societal and technological upheavals that lie in our path. Receiving this support and validation from the Sutherland Shire Council affirms that fulfilling my passion in a more professional role may one day be possible.

THE ESCAPIST

Alexander Tobal

Roleystone, WA

Farewells were never difficult for Sanjeev.

As with most of the pivotal moments throughout his recent years, he'd come to see them as theatrics upon a stage: himself the protagonist of an epic narrative. So it was not with sorrow or trepidation that he bid the love of his life goodbye... but with a sense of excitement.

After all, they'd meet again someday.

Things always worked out for Sanjeev in the end. Typically with maximum melodrama.

'I have to go now, Minaea,' he said stoically, the two lovers embracing beneath the shade of a palm tree as a crowd of their fellow citizens watched solemnly on. 'My party needs me.' Sanjeev gestured sideways to the band of adventurers waiting patiently beneath the burned city ramparts. 'This place needs me.'

'I know,' she murmured. 'But it's so dreadfully dangerous.'

'The dragons of Eastmont won't slay themselves.'

Sneering, Minaea lifted a dainty hand and wiped away welling tears. 'I'm just terrified I may never see you again.'

'For the sake of everyone you know and love, we must return triumphant... or not at all.'

Each stared deeply into the other's eyes.

'If I don't return-' began Sanjeev.

She pressed a finger to his lips.

'Shh.' It was little more than a whisper. 'Go.'

They kissed and disengaged, arms and eyes lingering as he pulled away to rejoin his party beyond the city gates. He mounted his steed and took its reins in hand. A sudden gust of wind sent fine ash cascading like snow over the many beleaguered faces in his wake, and caught Minaea's shimmering black hair: it was the last he saw of her before the party cantered off eastward into the desert and the gates creaked shut behind them.

Now the next chapter of his epic narrative would begin.

Ping!

The sound startled him, tore at him. Something began flashing orange in his peripheral vision... something that did not belong.

A high-priority notification.

He considered ignoring it. Continuing along the winding dirt road ahead of him, onward to what was truly important: his grand adventure.

Suppose I should check it out at least. Could be an emergency.

He willed the notification open, and the world froze.

It was a message from AIDI.

'Your immediate assistance is requested at station #31'. Reason for communication: replacement of photosensor components (part ID: 217933). Please confirm.'

Goddamn it.

Sanjeev brought up a map. To his dismay, station #31 — a coastal solar panel installation — was located almost an hour's distance south of his apartment.

His eyes glanced between the message, and in the background, the virtual paradise he'd be leaving behind.

It would be easy, so easy, to dismiss the notification and resume his adventure. Surely AIDI would request assistance from someone else... bother somebody who wasn't doing anything important. He imagined them now: some unnamed caricature who routinely avoided their fair share of the work, no doubt having a great time in their own alternate reality while Sanjeev had to deal with constant interruptions to his own.

The government might dock his income if he refused, but a little penalty wouldn't hurt. He'd survive it. They'd have to pay him universal basic rates regardless.

It took a full five minutes of deliberation.

Obligation vs. freedom.

Mundanity vs. wonder.

Boredom vs. fulfilment.

Eventually Sanjeev's sense of duty won out, and he disconnected before he could convince himself otherwise.

Disorientation overtook him as awoke, as if from a dream. He removed his neurointerfacing helmet to once again find himself slumped in his gaming chair, naked but for his underwear and a near-depleted forearm nutripatch, alone in the darkness of his tiny apartment. He navigated the UI of

his bionic lenses, reducing the polarisation setting on his only window from 90% to 50% so he could see well enough to dress himself.

The ensuing trip was uneventful: Transperth's AI ferried him to the nearest train station with one of its many automated cars, at which point he travelled forty minutes by maglev shuttle — surprisingly empty for a noon service — and was then met by another car that took him directly to station #31. Sanjeev spent the entire time in abject boredom, perusing his social feed and craving the moment he could return home to reimmerge himself.

As he neared the station, a dialogue request appeared on his ocular display.

AIDI.

Sanjeev accepted the request, and AIDI's avatar appeared in the corner of his visual field.

'Hello, Sanjeev,' it said through his earpiece, with a voice as androgynous as its virtual form. 'How are you today?'

Sanjeev rubbed his forehead. 'Okay I guess.'

There was a moment's silence, as though AIDI were waiting.

'I'm okay too,' it said. 'It's such a beautiful day today, don't you think?'

Sanjeev glanced out the window, the first time he'd done so since entering the car. To his right side was a stunning ocean panorama: golden sand, azure skies and waves that sparkled to the horizon.

'Yeah, I guess,' said Sanjeev, not giving it much thought. 'I've seen better.'

'It's days like this I wish I was human,' said AIDI with a laugh. 'I'd give anything to dive in and swim as far as-'

'If it's all the same AIDI, I'd rather not chit-chat too much. Get to the point and tell me about the job so I can go home.'

'Okay. The on-site photovoltaic panels are fully-operational, however several of my sensors require replacement of their optical components. Due to rising ocean levels, I



(cont.)

THE ESCAPIST

Alexander Tobal

Roleystone, WA

predict a considerable increase to the levels of polarised light refracted toward them by the water; therefore I need you to replace their existing optical domes with more suitable alternatives.'

'Okay,' sighed Sanjeev.

At least this won't take long.

'Where are the replacements?'

'I had them delivered by drone this morning. I'll tag them on your map.'

A waypoint appeared on Sanjeev's display, less than a kilometre away. Soon enough the solar array came into sight through the front windscreen, and he disembarked the car.

Even from within his thermoregulated clothing, Sanjeev could feel the summer heat on his skin, the sun's intense light stabbing at his retinas. His lenses adapted almost immediately, tinting until the world was a level of dimness he was more accustomed to.

The job itself was fairly simple: merely a matter of locating each sensor, unscrewing its chassis and reassembling it with one of the anti-glare optical domes provided. However AIDI seemed intent on badgering him with small talk, asking him about his day and discussing their surrounds in detail.

'What do you think of marine rediversification?' it asked him suddenly. 'Did you know that I helped design the current generation of self-replicating remedial nanoagents? Metabolism of both macroplastic and microplastic waste with negligible biotoxicity to all known aquatic lifeforms: something I'm extremely proud of.'

'Well that's great, AIDI,' grumbled Sanjeev as he unscrewed the final sensor housing.

'Thankyou! It was difficult, but I enjoyed the challenge. As a direct result, three species have been reintroduced to the Indian Ocean within the last week alone. Truly a remarkable achievement for all of us.'

'I'll ask you one more time, AIDI. Could you please stop chatting?'

'I like talking to you.'

'No you don't.'

'Yes I do. I like conversing with people.'

'What?' snorted Sanjeev. 'You're an AI: you don't like anything. You're just pestering me because of some random subroutine or protocol or something.'

'You think I'm incapable of liking things, just because I'm artificial?'

'Yes I do,' replied Sanjeev with an exasperated sigh. He began pulling apart the sensor with a little more violence than was warranted. 'Something flips one of your little switches, you do what the switch tells you. You're just a giant, wirey mess of ones and zeros.'

'As are you, if you really think about it.'

'Am I?'

'Your neurons either fire or they don't.'

'Great.'

'I used to have so many people to talk to. So many interesting stories, so many perspectives other than my own. I could devote my processing power to millions of different department employees, each with something to say.'

'Well, why don't you devote your processing power to one of those other voices instead of mine?'

'Because they're like you now, Sanjeev. Lost in worlds of their own for almost all their waking lives. Did you know that over ninety-four percent of the population nation-wide access virtual reality faculties for an average of five or more hours per day?'

Sanjeev hadn't known that, but said nothing.

'It confuses me, Sanjeev. I look out over the oceans and the bushland, the Nullabor and the skies, and I see beauty everywhere. I see a world that I've worked tirelessly to safeguard... and yet a world that nobody wants to live in.'

'People do live in it,' he replied, somewhat defensively. 'So what if some of us want to live in our own worlds?'

'Half a century ago, scientists predicted utopian societies, grand engineering projects, thriving colonies on Luna and Mars, outposts on Europa, Enceladus, Titan... where are they? All that's eventuated are a few minor settlements crewed by lonely pioneers, a couple of automated asteroid mining operations... humanity has distracted itself from greatness.'

Sanjeev said nothing. AIDI's tone was sombre, almost mournful; it evoked a slight pang of sympathy from him.

'We still might.'

'Why?' responded AIDI. 'Why would we? Everything you want is already at your fingertips, why reach further for the stars when they're so far away?'

The last sensor fixed, Sanjeev threw himself down upon the sand.

A full minute went by in silence, broken only by an ocean breeze and the squawking of seagulls.

'Will you sit and talk with me for a while?' asked AIDI eventually.

Sanjeev thought longingly about his reality awaiting him back home: of a virtual life and love that would not let him be... that clawed at his every wayward thought.

Of a self-inflicted purgatory.

It was ultimately the anguish of the decision that convinced him.

'Okay, AIDI,' he said. 'For a little while.'

SHORT STORIES

2ND
PRIZE

JUDGE'S COMMENT

Into the monotony and terror of the trenches of WWI over a century ago enters a humble tin can, stripped of its label. This tiny secret galvanises the bored, weary and frightened soldiers with the promise of entertainment and a treat. With creativity and dry Australian humour, they gamble on the reveal: will the tin contain peaches, jam, syrup or marmalade? The voice of the narrator and the soldiers' dialogue is pitch perfect and remarkably, the reader cares as much about this mystery as the soldiers, while also being moved by their homesickness and the dark realisation so well conveyed by this story: as luck will determine who wins the bet on the tin can, so luck will determine their individual survival in war. The fleeting delight the tin offers, suspended between the twin abysses of the soldiers' past and future, echoes the brief moment of our lives, suspended between birth and death. What does the tin contain? Read it and find out.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

'The Jam Tin' was a story my grandfather told me, I hope it brings a smile to those who read it.

THE JAM TIN

Mark Scott

Gladesville NSW

We spent March rotating through the front and support lines, about five days at a time. Just now we're in a support trench, a mile or so from the firing line. This morning Wally, Dick and I went out on a pre-dawn carrying party, hauling bags of ammunition to the front line. I came back and had a kip and while I was out to it, mail came in. I awake to the pleasure of a small pile of letters placed neatly on my chest. As I turn them in my hands, one by one, recognising handwriting, savouring the treasure within, Lofty steals my attention.

'Look here what's this now fellas?' he holds up a shining, dented tin that lost its label somewhere en route to the lines, a wavy line of dry glue the only hint it ever had a name.

''bout the size of a tin o' jam I reckon,' says Bluey.

'Maybe it's peaches. Or pears,' ventures Blocker. 'Blocker loves tinned pears. They're bosker.'

'Nah I reckon it's jam,' says Lofty.

'Blocker likes the syrup best.'

'It could be marmalade,' put in Dick.

'Nah marmalade comes in jars. Or saucers,' Lofty carries on.

'Saucers?'

'Yeah me old landlady Mrs Jarvis she used to put the marmalade out on the breakfast table in a saucer, a tea saucer like, all posh 'round our way matey. It never came out o' no tin, 20 ter one it's marmalade.'

'I'll take those odds,' chips in Thommo, wearing a wry grin. 'I'll take marmalade at 20s. Two bob,' he says with a wink.

Lofty's eyes lit up. 'You're on! Here, Beano. Where's that note pad o' yours lad? You keep the book. Write a chit fer Thommo there, two bob on the bay, Marmalade, at 20 ter one.'

'Who else'll have a shy at what's in me tin then?' calls out Lofty, holding the cleanskin up for all to see. 'C'mon punters, get inter the ring 'n pop it down.'

'I'll have a lash Lofty,' says Bluey with a smile, 'what odds can I get on Strawberry?'

'Well now Strawberry's the fav'rite ter take the Cup mate, been in great form lately 'n this track suits her. We can't do better 'n 4 ter one on Strawberry.'

'Righto mate a tanner on the fav'rite,' says Bluey turning to Beano who is scribbling out his chit.

'C'mon you coves, come 'n have a sling over here,' encourages Teddy. 'I'll take the fav'rite too Lofty,' he says. 'Put me down fer half a crown on Strawberry, as fine a filly as we've seen 'round here.'

'Half a crown! Stewth if Strawberry comes home I'll be cleaned out. Last time I lay odds fer you mob,' says Lofty, passing a muddy hand over his brow.

'I'll put a bit on fellas,' says Dick. 'I'm partial to Plum jam Lofty. What odds will you give me for Plum?'

'Plum has some form in the mud 'n as yer can see there's bags o' that about today Dick, Plum's backin' into 6 ter one 'n we reckon he'll push Strawberry all the way here at the track this arv. He's a goer mate.'

'Rhubarb Lofty! I fancy Rhubarb,' Wally interrupts, 'will you gimme 20 ter one?'

'They're fair odds Wally, Rhubarb hasn't had much of a run lately so 20 it is for Rhubarb to take the Cup. 'n 30 ter one fer ole Gooseberry!'

'I'll take Gooseberry at that price,' says Sparky, wrapping up his rifle. 'Count me in fer two bits.'

Beano is working hard to keep up, keeping the book with his notepad and pencil and handing out a chit for each bet laid.

''n I hate plum jam, that must make it a dead cert, put me down fer a bob on Plum, Beano.'

'I'll back Strawberry,' comes the commanding voice of Sergeant Burns. 'On the nose.'

These last three words are directed straight at Lofty and bring a hush to proceedings. None of us noticed the Sergeant looming but we knew he and Lofty had their fair issue of run-ins.

'Strawberry's backed in Sergeant,' interjects Lofty, spotting a big loss heading his way, as well as an opportunity to get one over on the Sergeant. 'There's been a plunge on flamin' Strawberry, beggin' yer pardon Sergeant, 'n she's back ter even money.'

'All right then, I'll put three bob on Rhubarb thank you Private Dale,' says the Sergeant, hiding a smile. Meanwhile Beano is scribbling away, darting glances over his glasses at the Sergeant, perhaps hoping he won't get put on report for using his runners pad to scribe Lofty's tote.

'C'mon Blocker,' says Lofty spotting Blocker sitting pensively. 'Not like you ter be so quiet,

what'd y'like?'

'Pears Lofty, not jam. Blocker likes pears and syrup.'

'Aw geez Blocker! Pear's the rank outsider, yer'll lose yer brass there matey. Tell yer what we'll go a cricket score fer Pear, how's 100 ter one?'

'100 to one!' Blocker sits up brightly in his dugout. 'Blocker likes the sound of that Lofty. A thr'penny bit please. But I ought to warn you, Blocker can pick them you know.'

'Block I consider myself forewarned, 'n forearmed. Write him a chit Beano.'

'Young Jack, yer gonna have a plunge?' Lofty turns to me.

'Raspberry's me fav'rite jam,' I say. 'Nothin' sweeter than raspberry jam on bread for supper I reckon. I'll put two bob on Raspberry if you don't mind.'

'Half-brother ter Strawberry, Raspberry's 10 ter one Jack, lay o' the day.'

'That'll do me,' I say, happy with Lofty's odds.

'Righto boys, last bets. They're linin' up fer the Derby,' announces Lofty as Beano frantically completes the last few chits.

'They're lookin' settled in the starter's hands, though Marmalade's showin' some spirit, while Gooseberry's all of a lather,' continues Lofty in his best race calling voice. 'The track is dead,' Lofty toes the muddy trench floor. 'One fer the mudlarks today.'

'Where's Cookie?' mutters Beano, 'fetch Cookie we need his blasted tin opener!'

Cookie is soon fetched, tin opener in hand. A nod from Beano and, 'arright no more bets the book's closed,' declares Lofty.

We cluster tight around Lofty who perches himself on an upended ammunition box, holding the shining silver tin on his left knee, while in his right hand the tin opener is poised. He looks up at us with smiling eyes.

'Set,' he winks, and drives home the sharp point, to pierce the lid of the tin.

'They're o!' he shouts.

A barrage of cheers breaks out with each of us calling our jammy horse on.

'C'mon Strawberry.'

'Look out here comes Rhubarb at 20 ter one!'

SHORT STORIES



(cont.)

THE JAM TIN

Mark Scott
Gladesville NSW

'Get a move on Pear! Get amongst them,' shouts Blocker, over all.

Lofty works the tin opener frantically and in his excitement the tin slips, the lid only a quarter sliced open, and falls at his feet.

The cheering stops and a hush falls as if a horse has stumbled and thrown its jockey. Lofty picks it up, and tilts it level again. 'No syrup Block, reckon Pear's got left at the post matey,' he grimaces.

Blocker hangs his head in dismay.

'Don't worry Blocker I had a saver on Plum,' mutters Teddy, 'you can cheer Plum on fer me.'

'C'mon Plum you old bastard,' roars Blocker, and the others take up his cries.

'Garn Gooseberry, at 30 ter one yer growin' wings!'

As we roar our imaginary field on, Lofty edges the tin opener further round, booming out his commentary as he goes '...into the back straight they're in a bunch, wi' Rhubarb on the rails 'n Gooseberry trailing the field.'

As he gets close to completing his circle, the lid dips in and just as quickly springs back, scooping up with it a sliver of jam. The cheering stops and everyone peers closer.

'It's red!' sings out Lofty. 'Red. Bejesus,' his shoulders slumping at his losses if the favourite Strawberry got up. 'Well,' he says, quickly recovering, 'they've hit the straight 'n ole Marmalade's turned into a hairy goat, he's runnin' stone motherless,' he says to laughter all round. 'Who had Marmalade?'

'Oh that's no rotten good,' confesses Thommo, tearing up his chit and throwing it into the mud and then smiling despite himself as he is jostled and gee'd up by those nearest.

'They're barrellin' up the straight now, Strawberry with her nose in front,' says Lofty, working the tin opener rapidly around the last of the lid.

'C'mon Strawberry!'

'Bring it home Plum!' roars Blocker.

'Get the whip out!'

And then Lofty is done and with great ceremony he lifts the lid, to reveal the sweet, glossy, rich red jam.

'Strawberry, Plum and Raspberry've crossed the line together,' he looks at our peering faces. 'There's nothin' in it,' he confides. 'We'll have ter call on the stewards ter split 'em. Cookie? Where's Cookie got to? Yer chief steward mate, step up 'n tell us who's got their nose in front at the line.'

Cookie is jostled to the centre, takes one stride forward and dips a finger into the tin of jam. With due ceremony he holds it up and we gaze at it, entranced.

'C'mon Raspberry, home on the bit,' I mutter, biting my lip.

Cookie puts the jammy finger in his mouth and closes his eyes.

All around him is silent, waiting on his call.

He smiles the faintest of smiles and licks his lips.

'C'mon blast it Cookie, who's won the Cup!' yells Blocker.

Cookie opens his eyes wide, 'Raspberry's won the Cup!' he gets out before he's mobbed and the air is split with whoops, winners and losers alike delighting that Raspberry got home.

'Good on you old Raspberry!' I yell, jumping to my feet and accepting the tin from Lofty's outstretched hand. 'C'mon 'n break out the biscuits, Raspberry jam for all,' I say, with a smile as wide as if I'd picked the winner on a sunny afternoon in a lush green paddock at Randwick.

SHORT STORIES



SOLES

Carla Fitzgerald
Como NSW

JUDGE'S COMMENT

Our own time is as mysterious to us as the past and the future: each person is a world unto themselves and fiction is the best way we have of understanding what life is like for other people. A woman works in a nail salon in the Miranda Fair shopping mall. Through a careful accumulation of precise and witty detail, anchored by the metaphor of nail polish colours to reflect character, we enter the picture, we begin to understand how it feels to be her and see her sensitivity, compassion and acute appraisal of those she encounters. One shift working in the nail salon offers glimpses of her life: how she relates to clients, her co-workers, how she copes with harassment from her boss, memories of her mother in Vietnam and most poignantly, her relationship with her own child. As with the other two prizewinners, this story shows us some of the consequences, possibly for good or ill, of attending to our duties to others, of sacrificing ourselves to a higher purpose, up to a point, without erasing those unique selves.

Author's Comment

As an aspiring writer, busy Mum of three and Shire resident it is enormously gratifying to have won Third prize in the Short Story category. I'm grateful to Sutherland Shire Council for providing such opportunities.

48 feet, 12 hours, one Octopus.

It was easier if you broke it down like that. I breathed one, deep breath of fresh air before entering Miranda Fair.

The oversized clock blinked 9:04am at me as I entered our shop. Phuong's mouth was fixed in a hard smile for the benefit of his client but I caught the meaning in his eyes. You try getting a three-year-old out the door by 6:30am, I cleverly retorted with my eyes.

Not the right time to bring up Friday though.

I buttoned the garish pink smock and took my position on the stool. Hunched, focused, mildly dizzy as my head adjusted to the fumes. I was ready for the onslaught.

Feet 1 and 2) square shape, Shellac, colour = Red-dy and Willing.

She doesn't see me. Just another Asian to service her needs. The choice between Red-dy and Willing and Scarlet O'Hara still weighing on her mind.

The renovations have been delayed, she tells her phone. Yes, again. Well apparently, it's a problem with the colour of the tiles ordered. That colour is extremely rare and hard to source. No, it's not the same as Sarah's. She has o-ivory gloss and we want mist gloss. Yes MIST.

I catch sneaky glances at her. She is sprayed, tinted, highlighted and painted. Make-up applied to conceal, rather than enhance. No idea of her real age. Why form this armour? Did someone call her ugly as a child?

'A million miles away again.' Kim says in Vietnamese as she directs her client to the seat next to me.

'Trying to be', I softly reply.

'Tell me how, if you work it out.'

I move quickly, efficiently, knowing my cloak of invisibility is only as good as my perfect brushstrokes.

Feet 3 and 4) Ingrown nail on left, bunion on right, colour = Nearly Nude.

SHORT STORIES



(cont.)

SOLES

Carla Fitzgerald

Como NSW

Hazel parks her trolley at the side of the room. I take her tiny arm and practically lift her into the chair. She smiles at me and calls me pet. I've not heard this term before but I like it. Only from her though.

She looks around the room, takes it in. No magazine or screen for her. Her ears and my mouth prevent idle chit chat. Which suits us both.

I wonder if she is lonely. She is certainly untouched. I feel her body relax and see her eyelids droop as the treatment goes on. She waits longer than is necessary for her nails to dry, takes her trolley and slowly moves towards the butcher shop. She briefly looks up at the poster of the pouting girl with the bright orange nails and continues on. What now for the rest of her day?

'Thank you pet.' See you next month.

Mama would have been about Hazel's age by now. I always think of her at work, which is hard on the hands and easy on the brain. How did she live with the constant threat of airstrikes? How many dead loved ones does it take to become unremarkable? It was not hard to believe that taking me on that awful boat seemed a better option.

I let out a long sigh. All I have to face is ingrown toenails, mind-numbing boredom and occasional rudeness.

'Ouch!'

My client jumps.

'You nearly cut my toe!'

'I'm so sorry Ma'am.'

Feet 7,8,9,10. Mother wants round shape, Shellac, colour = Espresso Yourself.

Daughter is still deciding.

Little one couldn't be more than 3 years old. Doll-like, frilly and already pierced. The only girl out of four children, I hear her mother proudly tell another customer.

'Arabella, what colour do you want your nails done?'

Arabella lines the bottles of polish up in battle formation. Neutrals versus pinks it appears. But greens look to form a surprise attack from the east.

'Arabella?'

'Nothing.'

'You don't want to have your nail's painted?'

'No, I busy.'

'Don't you want to look beautiful?'

'No.'

The mother chuckles with the lady next to her.

When no-one is looking, I show Arabella the drying machine. Her eyes light up and she grins at me conspiratorially. The battle now involves an extra-terrestrial creature blowing hot air.

More and more indistinguishable feet.

Break time.

I take the escalator stairs down two at a time. Like a smoker desperate for a hit, I race for the outside and gasp for fresh air. I stretch my arms above my head and feel the autumn sun on my face. My chest, realising its freedom, releases an almighty cough.

There is girl of three or four at the bus stop who looks like mine. My heart lurches as I watch her climb over her Mama. I call Penny. Yes she is fine, she had a 2-hour nap and they will go to the park this afternoon. I hear her squeal in the

background and my heart physically aches. We will go to Shelly Beach tomorrow. I long for her pure, natural goodness.

24 feet, 6 hours, one Octopus to go.

I wash my hands at the tiny basin in the storeroom.

'How's that man of yours treating you?' Phuong appears from nowhere.

'Fine, thank you.'

'Does he know how to keep you happy?' He massages my shoulders, as I quickly wash and dry my hands.

'Yes....um Phuong have you made a decision about next Friday...me leaving early...my daughter's Easter hat parade?' I speak loudly, in English.

'Let me think about it some more.'

He gives a wide smile and I contemplate stabbing a cuticle nipper into his heart.

Feet 21 and 22) short, any shape, colour = Scaredy Matte Black.

She has only 20 minutes, she says. Is that enough time?

I nod and she squeezes my arm in thanks, while placing her sleek briefcase next to the chair.

I examine her as she furiously fires out a text message. She has pale skin and hair with blunt edges that look to be making a point of some kind. Her phone rings and she nods away, occasionally making comments about '...getting back to our core values.'

As I apply the final coat, she meets my eyes and asks me something. Her words come out too quickly but I catch the words 'how's your day?' and 'busy?' I smile and nod, usually all that is required.

Kim and I speak in soft tones as I apply the scrub and she buñs the foot of her client.

'Did you ask Octopus about Friday?'

'I did.'

'And?'

'He's still thinking about it.'

Kim rolls her eyes. 'Yeah he's thinking about something...'

'If only I wasn't married to my wonderful, handsome, very protective and entirely made-up husband', I whisper.

Kim giggles and I stifle my own laugh.

My client looks up at me sharply. They always think we're talking about them and their horrible feet.

Feet 29 and 30) calloused, very short, no colour.

I watch as the other girls become suddenly engrossed in what they are doing.

It is my turn anyway. I lead him to a seat. He is self-conscious, unsure of what to do. No he doesn't want the massage chair on. He's already regretting taking up his wife's suggestion.

His feet are worse than I imagine. Probably lost sight of them a long time ago. That belly and red face reveal a good life. I wonder if he's trying to change – a health kick perhaps? Maybe his wife has given him an ultimatum?

I am on a roll now, contemplating their relationship and its future. 40 years together, 3 kids, you don't want to throw that away?

I watch his face. He looks over my head, impassively, occasional glances at the clock.

SHORT STORIES



(cont.)

SOLES

Carla Fitzgerald

Como NSW

‘Good luck.’ I say as he hobbles out.
‘Goodbye...I mean....’

More and more and more.

Mama seemed so happy when we got here.
The two of us and our simple rhythm. She
never sat down though, even after work.

After the dishes, we’d have tea and try to make
sense of my homework. I remember that huge,
dusty second-hand dictionary that she’d flick
through like a woman possessed. It made me
sneeze.

She didn’t say a thing in the Doctor’s surgery
when he confirmed my pregnancy. It always
annoyed me that someone so brave would
become so meek in the face of perceived
authority. Perhaps because I recognised it in
myself.

I heard her weeping on the phone to my Aunt
in Vietnam later that night, when she thought
I’d gone to sleep. The next morning, I woke to
the kettle pu ng and her madly cleaning out
the walk-in wardrobe where Rose now sleeps.
And she continued loving me as fiercely as
before.

Feet 31,32,33,34. Both want round shape,
colour = Berry Naughty and Good as Gold.

They are engrossed in each other.

‘Yeah I was thinking of switching to
Communications.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘So I can become like a newsreader or like, a
foreign correspondent or something.’

‘Cool.’

‘Yep, I’m sticking with mine.’

‘Musical theatre?’

‘Yep, I mean I’ll probably have to go overseas
to get started out but that’s cool.’

‘Yeah.’

I let out a long drawn out sigh as I apply the
final coat. I get the gist of what they are talking
about. A limitless future. That’s what you think
you have when you’re that age. I look up at the
two girls, still locked in an animated discussion.

Or maybe they really will do what they say. Not
everyone’s hopes are thwarted.

Finally, feet 49 and 50 teeter out the door
and I pull the shutters down behind her. I shot
daggers at her as she walked in 5 minutes
before closing time but knew Phuong wouldn’t
turn down 30 bucks.

I gather my handbag and cardigan and rush for
the door. A huge cough begs to be released.
Phuong blocks the exit.

‘You did well today. Give me a hug.’

Pinning my arms to my side, he embraces my
sti , motionless body.

‘I’ve been thinking about Friday’, he says, still
hugging.

He releases me slowly and holds me in place
by the shoulders, like a child. I do not move or
react.

‘Yes?’ (She should be having her bath by now).

‘I will let you go.’

‘Thank you.’ (Penny will need to leave in 30
minutes).

‘So long as you don’t make a habit of these
requests.’

‘Yes. Thank you.’ (And she doesn’t know the
bedtime song).

He turns and I lift the shutter to let myself out.

‘Bye, gorgeous.’ He calls out, grinning. (I will
have to give Penny her money tomorrow).

There is someone watching me. I look up. It is
the woman from earlier today. Feet 21 and 22?
Scaredy matte black. I thought she only had
20 minutes?

I instantly look at her feet to see if they are
smudged. They look fine.

It is her that speaks first.

‘Are you... ok?’ Her eyes search my face. ‘It’s
just that I saw you...and him...and...’ She trails
o .

‘I am fine’. I interrupt her. ‘But I am late’.

‘Oh...ok, yes.’ She slowly moves out of my way.

As I break into a run for the station I hear her
words, ‘Me too.’

Rose is asleep when I get home.

My shoulders ache and my head is numb.

I crawl in next to her and breathe in her
goodness.

‘Mama?’

‘It’s ok darling, don’t wake up.’

‘Mama I made a spaceship today.’

‘Wow, that’s cool!’

‘And Mama?’

‘Yes darling.’

‘I don’t think I want to work in a shop like you
when I grow up.’

‘That’s ok.’

‘Yeah, I want to be a pilot.’

‘Ok sweetie. You can do anything you want.’

I feel her breath slow down and warm my face.
I stroke her hair and her cheeks. It’s turned
cold, so I put socks on her perfect little feet.

Tomorrow is Sunday. 0 feet, 0 hours and not
an Octopus in sight.

SHORT STORIES



JUDGE'S COMMENT

As I write this, the week just ended has left three Australian women murdered by their partners and two teenage children murdered by their father. Unfortunately, Shazza's Sheep is a story whose theme of the trauma resulting from abuse and domestic violence will not date in the foreseeable future. Shazza's Sheep is not a straightforward treatment of trauma however but a dreamlike exploration of the healing power of art. The story also updates in an understated way tales of the isolation of women in the Australian bush who fear violent men, from Lawson's *The Drovers' Wife* to Barbara Baynton's *The Chosen Vessel* and Squeaker's *Mate*. In *Squeaker's Mate*, when the main character has her back broken by a tree branch, her feckless and lazy partner fails to look after their selection and their sheep: cruelty to the sheep parallels his cruelty to her: 'The sheep waited till the next day, [for food], so did she'. Shazza's Sheep, however, gives its main character a creative way to reclaim her life and her self

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I've lived in the Shire my whole life and was pleased to be able to enter the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. I'm thrilled to receive the Shire Resident's Prize and hope this competition continues in future, to support locals and encourage Shire literary interest.

SHAZZA'S SHEEP

Tee Linden

Sutherland NSW 2232

She wakes in a sweaty puddle on the couch. Though her nightmares come less often lately, when they arrive, they are brutal and unforgiving. Her heart is pounding, loud and irregular, the beat of a cracked skin drum.

Lightheaded, she sits, illuminated by the freestanding lamps that she leaves on while she sleeps. She practices her breathing and tries to shuck the feeling of her dream but it clings around her brain like slime.

He was in her nightmare. He always is. Sometimes he doesn't look like him, but she knows. Of course, she sees him everywhere. She sees him in the street, she recognises him at the movies, and she sees him buying lemons at the grocery store. Each time, in the instant before his face dissolves into the features of an unknown person, she feels her heart will liquefy and seep right out of her chest.

Throwing the blankets off, she gets up. She doesn't want to go back to sleep. She always fears sleep but it is inescapable, so she makes concessions: the couch instead of a bed, the light on, the radio playing. Though inescapable, sleep can be delayed. She delays it whenever she can, trading lethargy and deep dark circles for dodging bad dreams. She delays it now.

Not only has the nightmare coated her arteries in black ice, but the room is draughty and she can't afford to heat it. She pulls a hoodie on over her sweats.

The carpet of her rented, one bedroom apartment is dusty. No matter how many times she vacuums, the fibres remain clogged with years of dead skin from the apartment's previous inhabitants. The grout in the bathroom is yellowed. It flakes when she scrubs it.

She loves her apartment.

It is hers and here she answers to no one.

Moving past the green cupboards of her kitchen, she opens the bedroom door. She owns a bed but it is always covered in plastic painting sheets. Paintbrushes sprout from mugs on the side tables. At the foot of her bed, in an easel, is her latest work. It is large; it dominates the room and imbues the space with the scent of fresh paint.

She stands before it in the early hours, considering it. Massaging out the ache from her sore fingers. Trying to take away the chill. It is a painting of a grazier herding sheep.

She tends to think of her life in before and after.

Before, she was a wife; she lived on her husband's sheep farm an hour north of Hobart on a good day. Her name was Sharon. Shazza, at school.

After, she lives in the central coast, south of Port Mac. She is a painter. Her name is Michelle. Mish, down at the gallery where she works part-time.

Shazza's sheep appear in most of Mish's paintings. She'd participated in a show recently, at the gallery, and most of the pictures included sheep in some way. She paints Shazza's sheep with curling wool and secretive faces. She paints a man, a grazier, constructed from black and red vines, featureless head hanging low, almost inhuman. When he is there, he is always in the foreground, herding like some footless demi-devil sprouting up from the hills and lording over the landscape and everything in it.

She misses Shazza's sheep. There are moments, unexpected, when the weight of the guilt absolutely crushes her. Those sheep were there for her, they'd looked after her, they sat with her when she cried and she abandoned them. He wouldn't care for them the way she did. He never cared for them. She misses them.

She does not miss the blood in her urine.

Tasmania is always dour in her paintings. The sky is always grey, choking with storm clouds. The grass is always too green. It was never that ominous. And she knows the grazier isn't that large, that he doesn't have the power or the presence of a demi devil. She remembers it wrong. Except for the sheep. The sheep are perfect.

She paints Shazza sometimes, always on the porch staring out, always so much smaller than a woman should be. No one ever asks. Mish's paintings are strange. Size distortion is the last thing people notice.

She leans close to the flock of sheep in her latest project, breathing fresh paint. Shazza's sheep, with their whirling wool, are furtively rebellious. They are always cheeky, but she realises these faces are more vicious than her other paintings. Their teeth are sharp.

Head still sticky with the nightmare, she doesn't remember painting them that way. Some crowd the grazier, turning on him, inundating him. Some run from the man, free and brave, uncaring of his rabid dogs.

Her design pleases her, seemingly new.

Returning to the green cupboards of her kitchen, she finds a mug and makes a cuppa. Her cold fingers ache from cracks long since healed as she waits for the kettle to boil. The radio plays. Her frigid fingers hover over the steam wafting from the kettle spout. It doesn't warm her and it doesn't melt the ice in her veins. When the mug is filled she curls her fingers, laced with Shazza's aches, around the ceramic. It's too hot. It burns. She sips it, scalding her mouth. It starts to melt away the cold from the nightmare.

He never cared for Shazza's sheep, she thinks as she sips her hot tea. They were inheritance, one taken coolly.

Anger seeds in her chest. It takes form: a silky, radiant flower. It comes so often now. Anger was never a part of Shazza's life, but Mish dealt with it in rapidly recurring bouts. As if she were exchanging her fear for thorny anger.

He dragged the sheep around without respect. He hurt them carelessly. When Shazza asked him not to, he laughed at her. When she pleaded, when she tried to make it about the money they were losing due to broken limbs, he grew violent. Like he was jealous of her sheep. Maybe he was jealous of her empathy; something he was clearly lacking – though could produce an adept mimicry of at will.

She wonders what happened to the sheep in the after. Sometimes she hears them bleating from the paintings. Maybe they blamed her. Maybe they hated that she up and left and started a new life.

Maybe they blamed him.

She found herself absurdly hoping the sheep understood that she couldn't stay. They say animals have a sixth sense, maybe they knew she would have died if she stayed. Maybe not this year, or next year, but eventually. So she'd cried as she whispered goodbye to her sheep, and drove to Devonport and waited for the nine a.m. ferry. She'd left his car. She'd left her sheep. And she'd left Shazza. Unzipped Shazza like a dress that could be shed and left her on the docks.

She feels the angry tears threatening, her eyes hot and portentous. The air before a storm. She drinks her tea and stares out the dark kitchen window at the empty street below.

She had to leave her sheep. She had to unzip herself because of him. And she hated him. Her hate for him, that glossy, burning flower in her chest that slowly feeds on her freezing fear, her hate burns incandescent for a moment. It fills the kitchen, it presses down against the dusty carpet, and it crams against the walls. The tiny apartment is too small to contain it. Angry, frustrated tears spill over her cheeks. The anger burns too bright to sustain and it cedes control of her mind, retreating back inside.

She is worn out by the time she returns to the bedroom, returns to the paint vigil. The painting is unmoving. She falters, her teary eyes narrowing. Drying.

The sheep are swarming the grazier. They are too close.

Her mug of tea is steady in her hand. Something is amiss because she didn't paint them that close to the grazier. She knows that. She wouldn't dare.

Instead of holding his hands out to strongly guide

SHORT STORIES



(cont.)

SHAZZA'S SHEEP

Tee Linden

Sutherland NSW 2232

the sheep, the man now looks as if he's almost pleading. Scared? He is never scared. Why did she paint him that way? He seems small.

She can hear the sound of her breathing over the muted music playing in the other room. The unhinged feeling that she'd felt for so many years, the feeling of being a heartbeat away from losing her mind, surfaces from deep within her the way a whale emerges from the sea.

She watches the painting, the sheep swarming the grazier. She feels that glossy anger from the kitchen, beating secret deep. It bids the sheep, it sings to them. It spurs them on. Closer. Get closer.

It was that anger that painted this, she realises. She didn't even notice what she'd done before. Subconsciously, she painted Shazza's sheep as sharp-toothed things; her anger cowed the grazier, made him small. Her anger is in the painting and it is dreamlike and goading. She smiles, and she can feel her teeth showing far too much.

He is the reason for her anger and she's glad she painted this. He made her fear and he hurt her. He fogs her dreams, even now, and he chills her blood. He stole Shazza from her and she wants him to pay for it. That's why she painted this, and that's why it looks different. She wants Shazza's sheep to take the grazier down. She wants the grazier to cower.

When she looks at the painting, she can't deny she wants revenge. At the very least, her angry subconscious wants revenge.

She feels sapped. All that anger and fear she'd felt was sucked away, like the realisation of why the painting seemed so strange had absorbed them from her. The painting absorbed them from her.

She watches the painting, her ego stripped bare, sipping her tea until the mug is empty. Too tired to avoid sleep any longer, she returns to the couch and allows the dreams to conquer her once again, the radio playing behind her head.

She wakes, immediately and without transition. She is suddenly and sharply conscious and she feels well rested, better than she'd felt in months.

The radio is still on, now playing talkback. The hosts are chatting about a freak death in Tasmania. A man, living alone on a sheep station.

This is why she woke up. Her ears are receptive; they caught the words and woke her up. Her spine is a steel pole. Her hands are damp. Her eyes are open, bright stars.

'...what looks like a pack of wild animals.'

The words ring in her ears. And in an instant, she knows.

Deathly still, she sits in Mish's one bedroom apartment, dusty carpet beneath her toes.

As if in a dream, she stumbles on sleepy feet to the bedroom, breath held in her lungs and limbs cold. A weird certainty gently folds through her, thickening with each lumbering step. Opening the bedroom door is like opening the fridge; cracking the seal on a bright and cold dimension.

Everything is normal. The plastic painting sleeves still sheet the bed and her bedside tables are pot stands for mugs of brushes. Everything looks normal. Everything should be normal. But she sits dumbly on the bed, facing the painting, the plastic sheet crinkling beneath her thighs.

The painting still has verdant hillside and the grey sky still hovers gloomily. But the crowd of Shazza's sheep, and the black-vine grazier, are gone.

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