



# 2020 Mayoral Creative Writing Prize



The whole  
world at  
home.



**Blacktown**  
City Council



# The whole world at home.

## HOME.

**It used to be where we came back to after work.**

**After school.**

**A place of family.**

**A place for relaxation.**

## BUT THEN 2020 HAPPENED.

**And suddenly the whole world was at home.**

**And, at least for a while, home was our entire world as, through our screens, we entered the homes, and the worlds, of strangers.**

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In 2020 we received a total of 363 entries across all the categories. This marked an over 100% increase from 2019. 50 schools participated in the competition.

The works were judged on originality, the construction of the story or poem, the use of language, (including creative expression, grammar, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling) and the way characters, atmosphere or setting was developed, or used words in a creative way.

The competition is open to residents of Blacktown City. It was critical the work was original and not copied in any way. An independent judging panel assessed all submissions.

# 2020 Successful Entrants

The Mayoral Creative Writing Prize aims to foster, engage and encourage aspiring writers of all ages. Now in its ninth year, the writing competition was initiated by Blacktown City Council following the successful National Year of Reading in 2012.

Over the years, children, teenagers and adults from Blacktown City have enthusiastically embraced their exploration of creative writing by entering the competition. The Mayoral Creative Writing Prize is just one example of Council's commitment to literacy and literature. Blacktown City Libraries facilitate many programs and workshops that strengthen literacy skills. At Blacktown City Council we believe that a literate culture is needed in every home, school and community - and that Council can help people of all ages and backgrounds to discover and rediscover the joy and benefits of reading and writing. I encourage the whole community to embrace the Mayoral Creative Writing Prize. I would like to acknowledge the contribution made by WestWords to the

Mayoral Creative Writing Prize. WestWords created the promotional material and arranged our highly skilled judges. WestWords is dedicated to celebrating and championing the stories of the people, places and cultures that comprise the heart of Western Sydney. WestWords believes in the power of literature and literacy, self-expression and creativity, to change lives. Blacktown City Libraries and WestWords are natural partners, not only with the Mayoral Creative Writing Prize but also for author visits and exhibitions.

I would also like to acknowledge the wonderful partnership venture, the Blacktown Writers Room, an initiative made possible through grant funding from Create NSW where Blacktown City Libraries are providing wonderful venues and WestWords will be running a comprehensive program to support our local writers.

Congratulations to all our writers, you are the literary giants of Blacktown City.

**Cr. Tony Bleasdale, OAM**  
Mayor of Blacktown City

<b>Nandana Anu Priya</b>	8-11 yrs	Poetry	Winner
<b>Emily McDonell</b>	8-11 yrs	Poetry	Highly Commended
<b>Elina Feng</b>	8-11 yrs	Poetry	Special Mention
<b>Zulkifl Khan</b>	8-11 yrs	Short Story	Winner
<b>Faavian Ahmad</b>	8-11 yrs	Short Story	Highly Commended
<b>Erika Mercado</b>	8-11 yrs	Short Story	Highly Commended
<b>Himani Bhandari</b>	12-14 yrs	Poetry	Winner
<b>Bilvika Abburi</b>	12-14 yrs	Poetry	Highly Commended
<b>Mannat Ali</b>	12-14 yrs	Short Story	Winner
<b>Katelyn Ray</b>	12-14 yrs	Short Story	Highly Commended
<b>Muneeza Ayub</b>	15-17 yrs	Poetry	Winner
<b>Chesca Chivers</b>	15-17 yrs	Poetry	Highly Commended
<b>Mackenzie Vary</b>	15-17 yrs	Short Story	Winner
<b>Zahrah Shah</b>	15-17 yrs	Short Story	Highly Commended
<b>Sarah Jane Cupitt</b>	Adult	Poetry	Winner
<b>Jessica Hanna</b>	Adult	Poetry	Highly Commended
<b>Rebecca Sullivan</b>	Adult	Poetry	Special Mention
<b>Jo Mularczyk</b>	Adult	Short Story	Winner
<b>Hardeep Dhanoa</b>	Adult	Short Story	Highly Commended

## PRIZES

The total prize pool was \$1,600. Winners aged 17 or younger received \$100 and their school, if it was located in Blacktown city, received a corresponding \$100 as an incentive to encourage the budding authors of our local area. Adult winners received \$200.

# From the Judges

What a year 2020 has been! Remember the beginning of the year, when we'd just extinguished all those bushfires, only to go into several months of compulsory lockdown? Remember that? Remember the face masks, the Zoom meetings, seeing the same faces all day long, day after day, week after week...? "The whole world at home" was chosen as the theme not because we wanted the writers taking part to wallow around in the experience, but rather to use their writing to process the experience. Because yes, for most it has been frustrating, even traumatic, not to mention heartbreaking. For some the chance to stay inside and shelter from the outside world has been a relief. Most of us have learnt things about ourselves — and our families, too — that we didn't know before.

As we read the 363 entries (over double the number we received in 2019), we saw the theme explored in many different ways. Some took a very direct, literal

approach. Others, much like some of the pieces in this collection, took a step back in order to find the subtleties and nuances in the less obvious. This is the power of the written word — to draw the reader's attention to some profound idea, or to reveal something surprising without having to actually say it out loud. When it works, it really is a kind of magic.

Congratulations to the winners and the commended writers, and thank you to everyone who contributed. It takes real courage to hand your words and ideas over to strangers to... well, judge. But it's also something of a thrill. So if you are reading this and wishing you'd had the courage to enter, we'll be back in 2021, with a shiny, new, equally relevant theme. And what will that theme be? We've no idea just yet, but here's hoping it's something like "Gee, I'm glad that's all over!"

**Christina Donoghue,  
Margot Hillel and James Roy**



## Christina Donoghue

is an Australian born African diasporic writer and multi-disciplinary artist from South West Sydney. Her debut poetry collection is entitled *Being and Becoming*.

## James Roy

is a critically acclaimed and multi-award winning writer of 35 books, written primarily for children and young people. His latest book *One Thousand Hills* (written with Noël Zihabamwe) won the NSW Premier's Literary Award and a NSW Premier's History Prize.

## Emeritus Prof. Margot Hillel, OAM

has been National President, and National Chair, of the Children's Book Council of Australia, President of the Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research and is the former Chair of the Academic Board at the Australian Catholic University. She is Chair of the Children's and Young Adult judging panel of the 2020 Chair of Prime Minister's Literary Awards.

WINNER / Poetry 8-11 yrs

# A Change to my world

**Nandana Anu Priya**

Riverbank Public School

My sight has become my universe  
I envy all animals. The freedom they  
get to touch everything through their clean  
Paws or claws. A bright smile shimmering over  
their faces like something has just lifted them  
Into their sky-high world.

A red carpet to everyone's hopes and dreams  
but

Let me count all the points of the day I have  
been

Ripping myself apart as if I was a piece of  
paper.

It felt like my toes had been soaked in concrete  
and I couldn't move them anywhere. All I could  
do was imagine

I am walking on a tightrope over the stormy  
seas. Lighting a fire in the middle of the forest  
to make you notice me.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Some lovely imagery and a depth to the writing that reveals multiple engagements with the theme.'*



HIGHLY COMMENDED / Poetry 8-11 yrs

# Solitude

**Emily McDonell**

Barnier Public School

Looking out the windows,  
Walking out the door,  
Yelling out to people,  
Only silence screams back.  
The whole world is at home.

Sitting here in solitary,  
Not one knock on the door,  
Feeling so alone,  
Life is just a chore,  
With no-one around anymore.

Where did all the people run to?  
They hid in their houses,  
Waiting for the day,

**Judges' Comments:**

*'The rhyming works well to the poem's advantage. The personal touch in the ending brings the 'story' full circle.'*

They can finally leave,  
And finally, be free.

Talking and communicating,  
It has all changed,  
Speaking is now Skyping,  
And it glitches and it lags.  
It's all so difficult now.

Only pets to confide in,  
And they don't give advice!  
When will this disease subside!  
No-one else to talk to,  
Alone here I reside.



# Our World Has Changed

**Elina Feng**

Matthew Pearce Public School

It's alright  
You're going to be okay,  
Nothing has changed,  
This isn't true  
The whole world's lights have dimmed,  
This world is dead,  
We are trapped in our own nightmare,  
We are stuck inside our houses,  
There is nothing we can do,  
Don't tell me,  
Nothing is happening,  
Everyday  
people have been killed,  
Silently,  
People have been suffering

Clearly,  
We need to take action,  
We can't just hope,  
That's just what they say,  
It's too late now,  
Don't tell me this isn't true,  
We have seen people at home,  
Forever,  
Our world has truly changed.

(Read from the end to start)

**Judges' Comments:**

*'A clever construction that successfully engages the reader to engage in multiple ways. A thoughtful reflection on the current situation.'*



WINNER / Short Story 8-11 yrs

# Unsuccessful Cure

Zulkifl Khan

Riverbank Public School

In a blink of an eye, everyone disappeared around me. The classroom was bare, except for the tables and chairs displayed systematically. After months of staying at home, being bored all the time, I treated this exceptional phenomenon with pleasure.

Finally, I thought. Something fascinating occurs.

I heard a faint creaking noise and saw the classroom door gradually opening, admitting my teacher inside. His back was towards me, and I knew something was amiss. In one fluid motion, he erased the math equations off the whiteboard and started writing. Then I noticed what he was writing with: a small knife, smeared with a thick black substance.

William Miller, I saw him write on the board. Without a single word, I got up from my chair and ran out of my class. Was this school always this gloomy and depressing? In the corner of my eye, I

saw more teachers, with all their eyes bloodshot and every one of them holding a similar knife. I wanted to scream. Why is this happening!!

I ran out of school, only to find random citizens turning around and walking towards me. I had nowhere to run, except one. I ran as fast as I could, rolled down and went through the arms of several people. When I got far away from the crazy people, I sat down and gathered my breath.

There were patrols, a few people that looked as if they were searching for something, or perhaps someone. Then it hit me! They were searching for me. I couldn't believe it. What was so special about me? I wasn't the sportiest, artsiest or smartest out of my class. So why were they coming after me?

I thought of this for a while, but when one patrol came alarmingly close to me, I decided it was time to move. I stood up



and halted because I had accidentally stood on a stick. The patrol stared at my 'base' and stared right at me.

"Uh oh," I whispered and ran.

I told you before that I'm not very sporty, so it was easy for them to catch up to me. Two of the patrollers pinned down my flailing arms and legs, while one smirked at me. Taunting me with that knowing look in my eyes.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Oh, you'll see, William," and with that, he took out his knife and...

And what? I couldn't feel anything. But then I saw something outlined in white, contrasting with the black background that I could see. I saw him pull something, and then I stopped existing.

To: Head Cure Research & Development Team

From: Dr William Lucas Miller

Re: COVID Cure Simulation No.378

Subject: Unsuccessful Simulation

Sad news team.

Our digital test subject didn't survive the cure (Codename: Onyxischios). It caused massive cases of hysteria and resulted in madness. But don't fret because we will succeed in finding the perfect cure.

Regards,

Dr William Lucas Miller

Head Scientist of SimForTheWorld.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Engaging creatively with the theme, the writer builds suspense and a feeling of menace. An original response to the theme. Outside the box and inside the computer game.'*

# The Whole World At Home

Faavian Ahmad

Quakers Hill Public School

For the last few weeks, we have been told to stay at home, not come out of our slum for any reason. Everyone is saying that it is a pandemic virus, the police, radio, and the television. They say we must stay home to avoid spreading the virus. But no one told us how we were going to earn money, buy food or survive. Don't they know that thousands of people are crammed in a very congested space where we live? A lockdown is easy for rich people, but for us, it could be more dangerous than the virus.

I used to collect old bottles from the nearby streets of my slum with my friend Tikku. I have not eaten for two days, and I desperately want some food. Tikku lived on a street under the bridge. I met him while he was collecting bottles too. He became an orphan two years ago when his mum died in a road accident and his father left him before Tikku was born.

Sometimes, we change the way we earn our money. We sell balloons and flowers at the traffic lights when the cars stop at a red light.

My Amma used to be a domestic servant in a high-rise apartment, but now she is not allowed to enter the building. After all, she might carry the virus, so she lost her job. Within one week after my dad lost his job in the factory, our savings were exhausted. We go to sleep with hunger most nights. We do not know how to pay our rent next month, and if we do not, we might have to stay on the street like Tikku. How can we stay at home if we are homeless?

The other day, my parents went in search of food and work. They were beaten up by a policeman for coming out, and they were forced to hold out a sign saying, 'We are the enemy of the nation because we do

not stay at home'. But are we really? Then, my parents had to wait for hours for free relief food and utilities. That part was also not so straightforward or easy, rather full of dirty politics and favouritism.

People are leaving the slum and going to their country homes where their families live because they cannot afford to live here due to joblessness. All public transport in our country has been suspended due to this pandemic, so they must walk there! I cannot even think of walking about 1,000 kilometres barefoot under the scorching sun with very small food or drink.

Thousands of people are already dying from this pandemic all over the world. I am worried; what will happen to my family and Tikku? Now it seems starvation, homelessness, even death is our destiny.

The only wish I have in my life is a peaceful night of sleep with a full stomach with my family. My only wish is now under threat.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Good use of first-person narrative. The drama of reactions to the pandemic (especially the episode with the parents) is handled well. A very different perspective and response to the theme.'*



# Lost, But Not

**Erika Mercado**

Rooty Hill Public School



Do you know what it feels to be lost? Where you fail to recognise the area around you, and you feel scared? I recall that moment I was feeling lost. But at the same time, I wasn't.

Sweat dripped down my forehead. I was out of breath and was panting. The wheels of my bike repeated its circular pattern, synchronizing with the movement of my feet pushing down hard on the pedals. I had no clear direction. No destination. I kept wandering around my neighbourhood. I must have been pedalling for hours. I suddenly came to a halt.

In front of me was my school. It looked like your average primary school. I recalled images of kids playing before the bell rang, boys running around, girls squealing with laughter, a welcoming principal and

whining kindergarten kids not letting go of their parents' arms. But where was the crazy and fun noise now? Where were the people that flock to the school? The staff, teachers, children and parents who liven up the school - where had they all gone? I clutched the two metal bars of the school's gates as if I was in prison. On the other side, it was empty. Abandoned. Without a trace of a living soul.

I mounted my bike. I pushed the bike's pedals continuing my aimless journey. Surely, I'd see some people, gathering around like before. Or at least, I thought.

2, 4, 7... it was nine buildings I rode past. Each place was no different to my school. I asked myself "Where is everyone? Is this all a joke?"

Tears flooded my eyes. My vision became

blurry. My heart beat fast, ushering the sadness I was feeling. There was no doubt about it. I was feeling lost, but at the same time not. I knew where I was. I recognised the houses, roads and cars. I was back to my now quiet cul-de-sac. I should be happy I had returned safely to the familiar. But there was something missing that made me feel lost. People. Without people, I was feeling lost.

It was time for me to bid farewell to the sunlight. The light blue sky fading into the horizon. Pink and purple hues painted the night sky, reminding me of the flowers growing in my backyard. If only someone was here to see the sunset with me. I missed my friends. Then, I heard voices, faint conversations, laughter and sounds coming from the TV. I realised people were not gone. They were in their homes keeping safe and doing their best to

adjust to this new normal.

I can still talk to friends and my teacher online. I can still do things I like. I have my family who loves me, and we still have fun together. Best of all I get to sleep in a bit the mornings and not have to rush to school. I rubbed my eyes to wipe off my tears. The whole world at home isn't so bad after all.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Not falling prey to the obvious this piece really tries to do something a bit different. There is narrative development; handling the tension and development well. The bicycle journey can be seen as metaphoric for the whole virus journey!'*

WINNER / Poetry 12-14 yrs

# The Whole World at Home

**Himani Bhandari**

The Ponds High School

How many countries have you visited so far?  
"The whole world", I would say with a smirk.  
I have seen the remarkable rainforests of Peru  
Through the cuckoos that fly past my house  
every morning,  
I have seen the radical rivers of Russia  
Through the paintings of my artsy mum,  
I have seen the magnificent mountains of Nepal  
Through the towers of bookshelf's at home  
Which provide me with the same sense of  
adventure  
Every time I flick through those pages,  
I have seen the gorgeous gardens of Japan  
Through the blooming roses and daisies that  
sway in my backyard,  
I have tasted the sweet sweets of India  
Through my mum's sensational cooking skills,  
I have tasted the spicy spice of Thailand  
Through the 2-minute noodles my dad hides in  
the pantry,

**Judges' Comments:**

*'A clever interpretation of the theme. The touches of humour which work well. Clever, a quite sophisticated construction.'*

I have felt the freezing frostiness of New Zealand  
Through the breezes of cold air occasionally  
coming from the aircon,  
I have felt the harsh heats of Africa  
Through the warmth of my blanket,  
And I have understood the Whole World  
Which lives within my very home.  
My home, my family is the Whole World  
I now know that being there is not important,  
but to feel it through your imagination is.



HIGHLY COMMENDED / Poetry 12-14 yrs

# The World At Home

**Bilvika Abburi**

The Ponds High School

They called it home; she never saw it  
The green man was all she knew  
A nurturing Satan who lurked the hallways,  
His shadow haunted her dreams  
his carriage delivered cries  
his toys were undesired  
her world was the man, he was all she saw  
Until, one day the flags had turned  
The man was gone, his toys disappeared, his carriage abandoned  
The war was over, the man was gone  
The world, her world was finally at home.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Thought-provoking and nicely structured. Completely different. Love it.'*



WINNER / Short Story 12-14 yrs

# When the Computer Has Had ENOUGH

**Mannat Ali**

Schofields Public School

Dear owner (who uses me WAY too much),

In these past few days you have been...

UNBEARABLE! From using up my letters to laying finger prints all over my screen. You keep moving my mouse as if it's a stress ball. You don't know how much it hurts when you squeeze it. Is it really MY fault that sometimes the power goes off? Is it really MY fault that your internet is super slow? Is it MY fault that everything freezes midway and just somehow shuts down? Ok. Maybe partly. Moving on, have you noticed that this working from home thing makes it really hard for both of us to focus and get the work done, but if you keep on using me and never give me a break then it will just make it harder. I mean, imagine the whole world at home using my fellow friends as their way to communicate to their classmates.

Maybe if you just considered using your sister's laptop (my cousin) once in a while, just saying, it's not that hard. It's not like I'm

asking you to charge my battery once in a while (Even though that would be nice). Anyway, I'm talking every fortnight. No negotiations.

Now it's time to focus on those horrid spelling mistakes of yours. You know how tired I get fixing up your silly mistakes. It's like telling someone that they are doing something wrong but they don't care and just repeat it and somehow still expect you to fix it. Doesn't that sound very tiring? Because it certainly is for me!

The last thing I need to say before I sign off is that a blue charger would go very nicely with my outer appearance (specifically the one in Amazon that has been in your cart for a while). Even though the whole world is at home I know you will stay safe and pass me on to your family. You know, you didn't do that bad of a job taking care of me, all though your dad did much better. By the way, you have all those windows open but no fresh air!

Sincerely, the laptop left on your desk.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'It's quite hard to maintain an anthropomorphic narrative but this piece does that very cleverly. Cracker of a conclusion.'*

HIGHLY COMMENDED / Short Story 12-14 yrs

# The Cascade Below

**Katelyn Ray**

Norwest Christian College

I watch the daisies bend to the summer wind. The harsh sun raining down upon the surrounding landscape. Mountains stretching for kilometers as giant walls caging the inhabitants inside. Children play in front of me. Spinning and twirling as they dance with the wind. They each have parents that comfort them and hold them close. Tuck them into bed and kiss their bruises. The village says that I once had parents too. That they loved me, but as the hours tick by I feel the fantasy they created slip away. The disillusion creeping up on me, like a sense of dread waiting for the moment when my life will collapse in on itself.

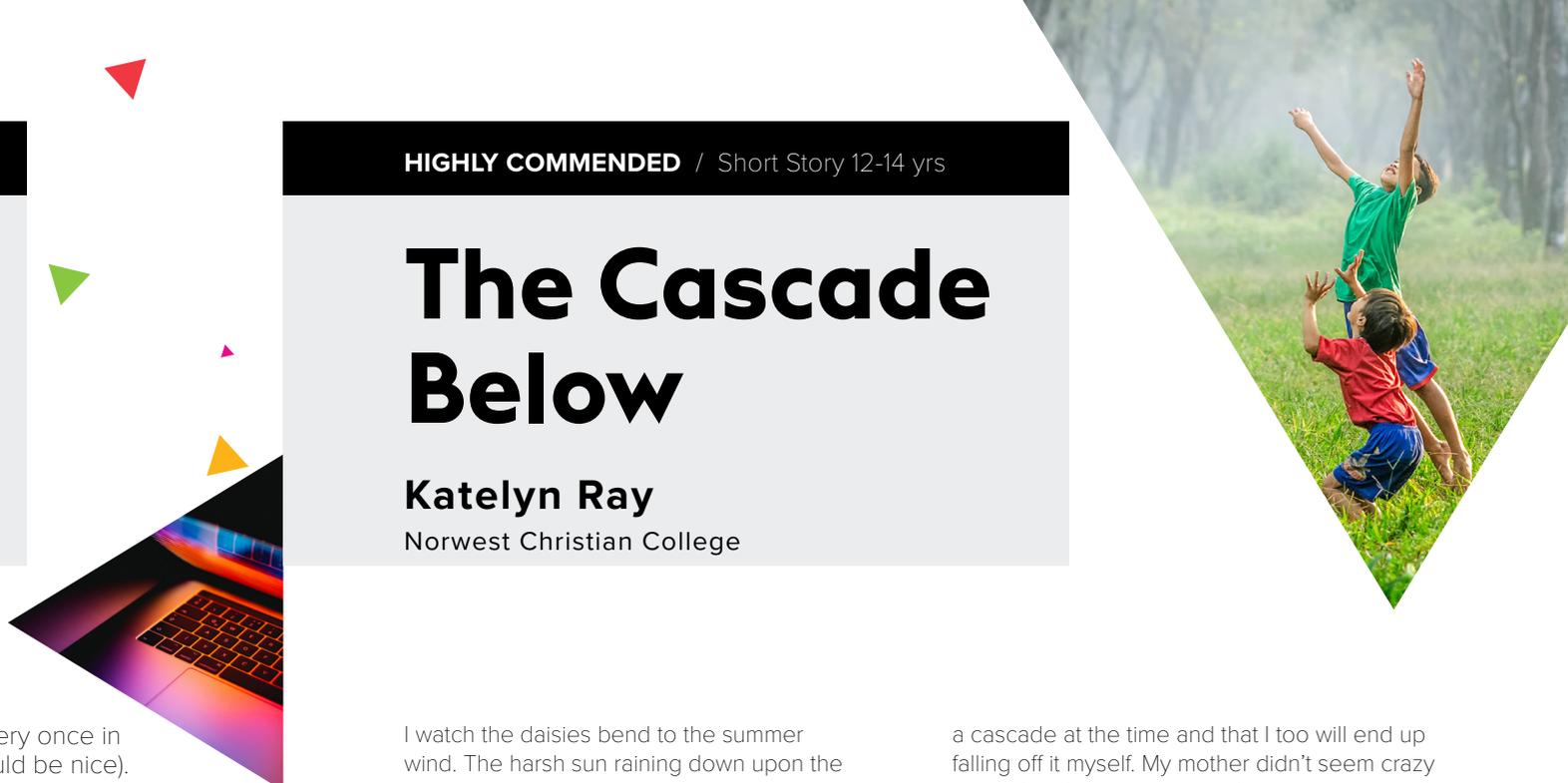
The children that dance before me lie oblivious to the pandemic that is encompassing their world. That as they run in the grass, the world they will inherit is crumbling around them. I can hear them calling me. The children need an extra person for their little game. That's the only reason anyone ever needs me, an extra. That is what I've been for as long as I can remember. Even my own parents didn't love me enough to stay. Even my name makes me stand out. Cascade. I hate it, the villagers say that only an insane person would name their child something like that. That she herself was mentally falling off

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Nicely paced, the reflective introspection is well-done and consistent. The last line, despite its slight sense of nihilism, is a nicely paced moment of suspended cadence.'*

a cascade at the time and that I too will end up falling off it myself. My mother didn't seem crazy to me, but then again everything seems normal to a ten-year old. My parents weren't from the village either. I guess that's why the village will never accept me. The reason no one bothers to even look my way. I watch the children now as their parents take them into their arms, feeling the warm embrace of their love. Knowing they are cared for and safe. That no matter how close the virus sails to the village the children will always rely on their parents, to keep them safe.

I'm required to lead the children down the waterfall this afternoon. A chance for the adults to pass over their parental responsibilities, if just for a little while. The waterfall is my favourite place. A chance to see my name represented in front of me, in its true form. A powerful beauty turning the landscape into an abundance of colour and sound. There's a sun-filled stop located right on the edge, just before the drop. The water is at its loudest there, mocking the silence of terrain that bows before its strength. I wonder what would happen if I stepped just too close to the edge, just far enough for the current to sweep away my problems. Just far enough for the cascade to envelope me.



WINNER / Poetry 15-17 yrs

# Hymn of the Sky

**Muneeza Ayub**

The Ponds High School

One eye shut  
One arm raised  
My finger following the glistening stars  
Connecting the constellations  
I sigh in peace  
The velvety feeling of comfort  
Washes over me  
I whisper, "Home"

70 000 miles away  
A young girl lies  
Hands over both ears  
The stars are out and shining  
But she's too scared to look up  
Planes screaming destruction  
Bombs dropping  
She sighs, "Home"

Across the country  
In a small shack  
A boy looks out at the stars  
Mum isn't home yet  
He looks down  
At dirty fingernails  
And ragged clothes  
Tears well. "Home"

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Avoiding the obvious, the poet provoked thought, universality and diversity all in one poem.'*



HIGHLY COMMENDED / Poetry 15-17 yrs

# When the World Split

**Chesca Chivers**

The Ponds High School

Father says that it was Mother's Fault  
Mother says that it was Father's Fault  
With one fight they halved the world

I live in the North  
I live in the South  
I miss my sister  
I miss my brother  
With one fight we are a world apart

Where I live it's cold  
Where I live it's hot  
Where we live it's dark and broken  
With one fight they filled the world we knew in darkness  
We thought marriage joined people  
We thought a ring was round to represent how endless love is

We thought this but... we were wrong  
We live like parallel lines to never meet ever again

A family of divorce  
The only thing left is a picture

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Deftly and economically written, a common situation redefining the meaning of home.'*



WINNER / Short Story - 15-17 yrs

# Child's Play

**Mackenzie Vary**

The Ponds High School



His little chest heaved from acute shortness of breath. His cheeks were flushed pink from his boisterous spirit, and his floppy auburn hair fell over thick-rimmed glasses. Here he stood on the edge of the Mount Livingroom, lava pools of mismatched plastic lego pieces bubbling and uninviting.

Burnt cushions stretched across the barren land, and books with loose stitching and torn pages bobbed un-naturally on the searing hot substance.

Strewn trucks shot up from the lava in geysers, almost causing Arlo to wobble where he stood, trying to map out the safest path.

Arlo adjusted his glasses on his freckled nose, squinting his eyes towards the horizon. His tread through Mount Livingroom would be more dangerous than travelling across the bubbling seas of MarbledBaths, where he could barely see

over the roaring storm and splashing of a rubber whale's magnificent tail.

It would definitely be more dangerous than wading through the darkened cave of Arlo's closet, where bats made of fabric sung from metal rods over his head, causing panic to swell in his tummy.

Yet, Arlo would not let fear deter him this time, and took an unnerving step onto the closest floating cushion to him.

It sunk slightly under his weight, but Arlo moved his other foot to meet the first. He clapped a small hand to his chest in relief, before making a half jump onto a book titled Adventurer's First Steps, then onto the next larger cushion.

A surge of plastic lava shot up before him, and Arlo yelped, trying to steady his balance so he was not touched.

Once his footing was regaining, he looked to his feet, where only one blue sneaker

hugged a little too tightly to his left foot.

Arlo nodded to himself and looked out again. Then he saw it! The missing shoe, up ahead, sitting on top of a colourful box filled with bouncy balls. The warmth filling his chest caused him to cover his mouth while he giggled. It was travelling upstream with the searing Lego lava, away from Arlo.

He couldn't let the shoe get away! Arlo took another stumbling step forwards, onto the top of the large suede couch.

He footwork was sloppy, and he continued to wobble on one foot. Arlo steadied himself with both arms half-raised stretched out in front of him.

Arlo pursed his lips, blowing a raspberry to himself in relief. The shoe wasn't too far ahead of him, and he knew by the feeling in his tummy that he could get to it in time.

He took another hesitant step onto

another buoyant book and brought his other foot to meet the first, perfectly balanced.

There was one more half-sunken book between himself and the toy box. Arlo took one of the deepest breaths he had ever taken before, and in a moment of courage, he lunged for the shoe and — "Arlo! Are you ready to go?" his mother said.

Arlo froze where he stood, clutching his other shoe with strewn Lego pieces around him.

"Yeah!"

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Well written, with a clever use of character point of view, the writer has a good sense of fun, approaching the stimulus in a unique way. Fantastic!'*

# Adventures of Willow

Zahrah Shah

The Ponds High School

The warmth of the morning sun, the chirping of the sparrows and the smell of fresh pancakes, set the scene for another magical day. Willow awoke from her dreamless sleep and forced her heavy eyelids open. Today, Willow's lazy and unbothered personality was on par with the curiosity and excitement stirring within her. Her drive as an explorer urged Willow to explore the enormous world that surrounded her, starting with her new home. A home with unexpected creatures, called humans.

Grabbing her backpack, and tying her auburn hair into a braid, Willow let out a loud whistle. Within a few seconds, a round fluffy squirrel came sprinting towards her.

"Yes! My ride's here," she said with excitement.

Her small hands grabbed onto the fur of the warm clever animal and letting out another whistle, the two of them rode the wind.

Through the tall grass shards, Willow could now only see the top of the human's fortress as the squirrel's tiny feet entered the realm of the giants. Willow's mouth was watering from the scent of pancakes that was now much stronger, but the loud rumbling of voices and music turned her attention towards a magnificent screen of light.

With every flash of light was a picture. A young boy baking cookies with his mom, a soccer match in Brazil and a news anchor reporting the status of a pandemic in America. Willow could see the whole world through this five millimeter-thin screen. As she leaped off the squirrel, she

felt herself being pulled closer and closer. When her petite body was only an arm's reach away, the screen suddenly turned pitch black and a giant shadow loomed behind her.

One thing she had always told herself before entering a human's realm was that staying out of sight was a must. But it was too late. She had been found out. Her hands trembled in fear, but she did not want to run for she knew this was the perfect opportunity.

Turning around slowly, her eyes widened with surprise as she looked into what seemed like a reflection of herself. A human girl. Identical. She had the same rosy freckles sprinkled on her cheek, the same vivid eyes that searched the oceans, and the same excitement that stirred within her. Perhaps they were each other's other

half, or the half they desired to be. The human girl noticed the surprise on Willow's face and bending down, reached out her hand for Willow to hop on.

Hesitantly, but with curiosity, Willow hopped on and together the girls journeyed through the realms of the fortress. A room of mother nature with the irises of France, jasmines of Pakistan and sunflowers of Ukraine, a room of the nation's landmarks perfect for Willow to climb, and a buffet with never-ending menus of curry, pasta, noodles, and pudding. For the human girl, the house was only a home, but for Willow it was the world, and this all she ever wanted.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Sophisticated use of the concept of world/home. The writing style is strong.'*



WINNER / Poetry Adult

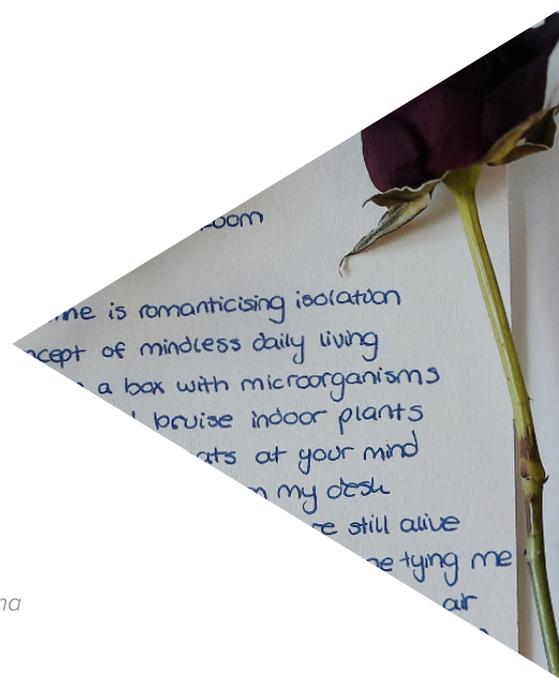
# The Plant Room

Sarah Jane Cupitt

quarantine is romanticising isolation  
a concept of mindless daily living  
trapped in a box with microorganisms  
that bite and bruise indoor plants  
the way silence eats at your mind  
the way the flowers on my desk  
have started to wilt but are still alive  
I feel trapped like there's a rope tying me  
close to the ribs that sucks out the air  
that I'm trying to breathe but its poison  
lures in the corners of my prison cell  
and if I escape, I'll most surely die

**Judges' Comments:**

*'A short, effective introspective piece exploring the dilemma of circumstance.'*



HIGHLY COMMENDED / Poetry Adult

# A Home's Decree

(A Graduate's Tragedy)

Jessica Hanna

The echo into the womb of uncertainty,  
Forced to retreat into the place I now  
despise.  
My fingers – pointing to feel the  
shedding sunlight between the blinds  
of my window.  
Spurring pestilence that has led me to  
become a corpse in my own home.  
Laying lifelessly on my mattress, on the  
couch of unproductivity,  
Imprinting the outline of my figure.

Rebirth is never easy,  
This home - my own riverbed that still  
cannot resolve me from sin,  
Sin and betrayal of self-negligence,  
Unequivocal clemency I cannot offer  
myself anymore.

A Year 12 student – grappling with  
any bit of ambition I can get from the  
keyboard.

Zoom,  
Another zoom,  
and I sit here- watching the digits follow  
one another till quarter-to.  
Waiting to replant myself beneath the  
soil of my knotted bedsheets.

And one day, my youth will hesitantly  
ask me to speak more about this year.

A nauseating nostalgia of the plague  
that shattered the sweetness of  
incomplete memories that had been  
frozen in time.

Left it to thaw out for another day,  
For another age.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Beautiful language, strongly evoking the emotional response to both present circumstance and future reflection.'*



SPECIAL MENTION / Poetry Adult

# August

Rebecca Sullivan

parting one point five –  
among the lavender  
a myna feather

five k ruled radius –  
behind a fence  
frayed bird of paradise

mask-less men at work –  
the seven sides of a stop sign

a grey gum forks  
electric wires –  
my muzzled breath

distant school bell sings –  
suitcase on the nature strip

in roller-blade knee pads  
an old man paints ...  
the broken lock  
on a gate that swings –



WINNER / Short Story Adult

# Ignorance is Bliss

Jo Mularczyk



stage four curfew

eight pm –  
rings around the August moon

**Judges' Comments:**  
*'Nicely engaging with the theme, an economy of language, strong image of enforced emptiness, allows for a slow pace that captures something of the day at home.'*

"Well hello darlin' how are you?"

"Fine Gran," I called as I entered her room. "Just need to wash my hands," I said as I ducked into her ensuite.

"Oh, don't worry about that love, just come and give your gran a hug."

"Sticky hands, I spilled my drink," I lied smoothly. It was a well-honed skill. I expertly followed the first lie with another. "No hugs today sorry, I think the kids have given me something."

I gazed fondly at the wizened body swaddled in bedclothes. The spirit remained undiminished though, held captive by its ailing host. I basked in her familiar scent. The smell of childhood, of safety, of unconditional love.

"How are Lyn and the kids?" she asked.

"They're good. The kids keep us busy, they're growing all the time." I struggled to think of other news to safely share.

"And how's work, love?"

I knew the script by heart now, and I could play my part.

"Work's the same. But a wise woman used to tell me, you work to live, you don't live to work."

Her flattered laughter filled the room.

"What about you? Any mischief to report?"

"Well, I watched a wonderful movie last



night about a beautiful young girl named Jennifer. She was on a spaceship full of humans travelling to another planet to live. They were in that cryo-sleep but then a handsome young man woke her up. Luckily for him, they fell in love”.

“Passengers,” I offered.

“That’s it, and there was one shot of that nice young man’s backside.”

“Geez Gran, I might need to talk to Terry about letting you watch raunchy movies,” I teased.

“I wonder if they ever thought about it?”

“Chris Pratt’s backside?!” I asked incredulously.

“No, I wonder if the Government ever thought about sending humans to Mars when that blasted coronavirus hit.”

And here we were, venturing into the danger zone.

“Who knows. It was certainly a difficult time,” I answered obliquely.

“Thank goodness that’s all behind us now,” she said with relief.

I was rescued by Gladys bringing Gran’s dinner tray.

“Have you had a nice catch-up?” Gladys asked.

“We have. What’s for dinner tonight?”

“Your Gran’s favourite. Lasagne.”

“Oh you spoil me,” Gran gushed. “Well darlin’ you best be getting home to that gorgeous family of yours. Give them my love.”

I blew her a kiss. She smiled, content in her blissful ignorance. It wasn’t enough to assuage my guilt. I left the room and Terry was waiting, kindness in her eyes.

“You’re doing the right thing,” she assured me.

“She still hasn’t asked for a newspaper?” I asked.

“Once or twice, but those puzzle books you suggested usually distract her.”

I nodded sadly and reached inside the bag I had left with Terry on my way in. I sanitised my hands and secured the mask around my ears.

“Stay safe,” Terry whispered as I opened the front door. I headed out of Gran’s cocooned world and into the afflicted one beyond.

**Judges’ Comments:**

*‘Using dialogue to tell the bulk of a story can be difficult to maintain but this works well. The characters and backstory come through strongly in the dialogue with flashes of humour allowing for an exploration of the social allowances we need to make.’*

# Inside Outside

Hardeep Dhanoa

The whistle of the kettle, the drip of the sink, the hum of the aircon remind me that I am here. That I am very much alive. I breathe. I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out.

Who would hear me anyway?

I make myself an Earl Grey tea to match the grey of the sombre sky that reflects the mood of the current times. I wonder where else in the world the sky is grey today. I wonder who else is making tea.

I have decided that today is the day I am going to do it. The four walls of my one-bedroom apartment feel as

if they're closing in on me more and more each day. I have no idea how long I have been in here. I have no idea how much longer it is going to be. My little phone screen, the only connection I have to the outside world pings all day with new news: "Covid spreading faster than ever! Stay inside or else!"

How can I trust what they say? Who am I supposed to believe? I put my faith in nothing yet here I am being forced to put my faith in people I don't believe in. I look out the window, lost and waiting for a sign.

I've suddenly lost my appetite for the



Earl Grey tea and spill it down the sink. I stare at the front door. I haven't unlocked it in days and the temptation to see what is on the other side grows inside of me. I've never thought much about the power of doors until I was told I couldn't open mine.

If I go outside, what's the worst that could happen? I may not even bump into anyone. But there is a chance I could. What if that person reports me to the police for being outside which is now a criminal offence of the highest order? Worse, what if they have the disease?

My feet slowly inch forward to the

door as if it is calling out to them. I turn the key. Should I do it? I need to know the world still exists beyond my smartphone screen.

My sweaty palms grab the handle. I turn it and let out a scream.

**Judges' Comments:**

*'Nicely constructed, vaguely nihilistic, the piece responds to the depth of desire we live, and die, with.'*



WestWords is Western Sydney's Literature Development Organisation.

We provide pathways of opportunity for the development of Western Sydney voices through innovative literature and related arts programs. We believe literacy, self-expression and creativity changes lives and communities. WestWords is committed to providing an environment where the stories of the communities of Western Sydney and the places they come from are celebrated. The guiding philosophy of WestWords is a belief that the unique perspectives and stories of the Western Sydney area deserve

to be developed in literature and shared with a wider audience.

We believe that engagement with reading and writing allows young people in particular to develop their imagination, gives voice to their stories and experiences, hones skills in written expression and illustration, and sets them on a trajectory for life. With a focus on literature, we deliver residencies, fellowships, workshops, performances, presentations and publications. Our partners include teachers, schools, universities, community and arts organisations.

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