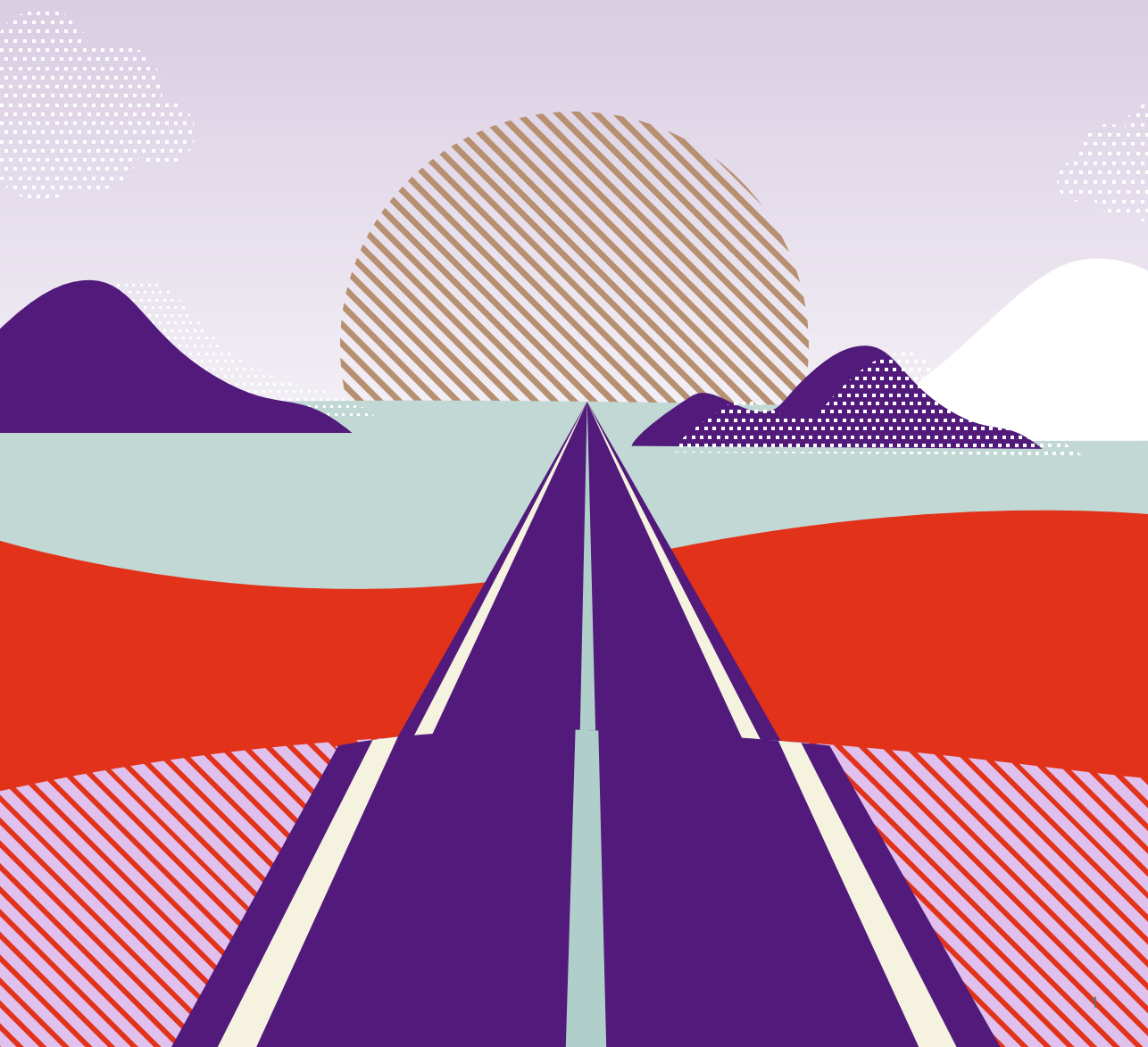


living stories
are we here yet?



Living Stories Western Sydney

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Foreword Are We Here Yet?

Australia is a land of stories and story tellers, of voices that arc from the ancient landscapes of the Dreamtime to this contemporary collection of stories emerging from the streetscapes and suburbs of Greater Western Sydney. *Are We Here Yet?* thrums with the energy of this dynamic and vibrant part of our State - home to over 2.5 million Australians originating from over 170 countries and speaking almost 100 different languages.

These are stories of colourful characters, of diverse cultures and mixed locations - the stories of people who live, work, play, survive and flourish in Western Sydney. As proud patrons of WestWords and avid readers, Dennis and I have been struck by the refreshing seam of authenticity amongst the humour, hurt and hope in these stories. In one the protagonist, in a cloud of self-doubt, questions the contribution they might make as an artist. But then comes the realisation

*Who has seen what I have seen?
Who has felt what I have felt?*

We commend WestWords and WestLit Libraries for establishing the inaugural Living Stories Western Sydney Writing Prize 2021 which has attracted the stories in this collection. The Writing Prize provides an important platform, especially for younger writers, to showcase their work and serves as a stepping-stone for further development and opportunity.

Ever focussed on the encouragement and advancement of young writers, WestWords delivered 36 writing workshops in libraries along with online workshops in the lead up to the call for submissions. Thank you to each of the writers who facilitated the workshops. Your expertise in conveying to participants the art of good writing is

apparent in the quality of the entries. We also thank the judges who meticulously assessed all the entries across two rounds of judging.

We acknowledge the support of the NSW Government through Create NSW as part of Arts Restart, the Australian Catholic University who sponsored the 16-18yr old category and has recently extended that sponsorship and Pepper Money who also contributed to the Prize. Without this support the Living Stories Western Sydney Writing Prize 2021 and the publication of *Are We Here Yet?* would not have been possible.

To the authors published in *Are We Here Yet?* - Congratulations! Whether this is a first step or one of many along the way in your writing journey, be encouraged that it should not be your last. Your reading public deserves to see more of your insightful, funny, poignant and searching work.

To readers - embrace the journey! Reading is a joy, an education, an exploration, and an exposure to the world of the writer. With each piece under 500 words, you can choose to be engaged one story at a time or to go for a ride and take in several in a sitting.

These stories are transformational for writer and reader and their publication a milestone in the unique literary world of Western Sydney. As proud joint Patrons of WestWords, Dennis and I are honoured to support *Are We Here Yet?*

**- Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret
Beazley AC QC
Governor of New South Wales,
and Mr Dennis Wilson**

¹ Charnel Rizk, Cumberland 18+ Winner

**LIVING STORIES WESTERN SYDNEY WRITING PRIZE 2021
PRESENTED BY WESTWORDS AND WESTLIT LIBRARIES**

Are We Here Yet?

Western Sydney is a place that has changed in the past, is changing right now, and will continue to change into the future. Some of those changes have been traumatic and painful, others have been full of joy, relief, and new beginnings. Ours is a dynamic place made up of intersecting yet distinct communities, each bringing with it a rich mosaic of history, complexity and stories.

The Living Stories Western Sydney Writing Prize is a new creative writing competition that draws on a proud lineage of other writing prizes, providing opportunities for young and emerging voices, a forum for reflection and conversation between communities and insight for audiences both here and well beyond the region to appreciate and begin to understand the tapestry that is west of the harbour.

The prize was open in early 2021 as we all looked hopefully toward a year that wouldn't be defined by the fires, floods, pandemic and the uncertainty of the previous twelve months. Many were affected including those of us who, as creators or audiences turn to the Arts to seek escape, to be entertained, transported and challenged. We find solace, meaning and reinvigoration when our stories are reflected back to us. 2020 was difficult and with the investment made by the NSW Government through its Arts Restart stimulus package we were able to approach WestLit Libraries to co-present this prize for the very first time. This attracted other support, notably from Australian Catholic University as the sponsor for the 16-18 year old category and Pepper Money. We couldn't be more grateful.

The prize was open to residents of Greater Western Sydney across four age categories: 10-12yrs, 13-15yrs, 16-18yrs and 18+. Entries could be in the form of a poem, short story or personal essay, to support the writers in their creations, in little over a fortnight, we ran 36 creative writing workshops across Western Sydney with more online.

The writers were asked to respond to theme *Are we here yet?* The responses were characterised by an intersection between the writers' own experience and ideas of place and

identity, both communal and personal. How they grappled with this thematic focus along with their originality, creativity, construction and use of language were the criteria by which their work was to be judged.

The entries were assessed by 23 judges drawn from each local community, as defined by each of the 13 council districts and Western Sydney writers. The judges arrived at a regional winner and highly commended entry. These 67 works are contained within this book. The winners from each local government area then went to a second round vying to be overall winner and highly commended in each category. These judges deserve a debt of gratitude. They read these entries in their lunch breaks, before they went to bed, or whenever they could snatch a spare moment.

Alongside our partners and sponsors we would like to thank the library and council staff who, on a short turnaround, helped publicise, promote and facilitate this competition. Thank you to the various libraries who agreed to host the 36 free creative writing workshops. Of course, we also wish to thank the writers who presented those workshops, and the many other Western Sydney writers, young and old, who attended them. In addition, we created online workshops for those who couldn't attend the in-person workshops. Thank you to those writers as well. They can still be found on the WestWordsOFFICIAL YouTube channel. One of the key aims of this endeavour, coming particularly after 2020, was to provide employment to those freelance professional writers who experienced substantial loss of income. Through this competition and the opportunity to present workshops we are pleased that we could provide some small contribution to their post-COVID recovery.

We would like to particularly thank Jenica Loa, Ana Ramos, Luke Beeton and Hayley Lam from Sailor Studio who unflinchingly brought their creativity and expertise to the book's design, as they do to all of our publications. Finally, we would like to thank all the writers who submitted entries. The depth and vibrancy of their contributions reflect the richness that is Western Sydney.

Each of the local adult winners received \$300, and each of the local junior winners received \$100. Highly commended entrants won \$100 (adult) and \$50 (junior). The overall adult winner received \$1,000 and each of the three overall junior winners received \$500. Highly commended entries received \$500/\$250.

The judges

Sarah Ayoub, Therese Baldwin, Rachel Barnes, Lachlan Brown, Cassy Carmody, Cr Robin Cook (Penrith City Council), Rachel Evans, Mayor Therese Fedeli (Camden Council), Sandy Fussell, Prof. Diana Glenn (National Head, School of Arts, ACU), Catherine Goldzieher, Michelle Hamadache, Gillian Hamilton, Barbara Hillman, Silvana Lofaro, Antony Mann, Melina Marchetta, Abeny Mayol, Samantha McLaren, Fiona Murphy, Deborah O'Ferry, Rachael Pender, Vivian Pham.

The workshop facilitators

Deborah Abela, Rawah Arja, Pamela Freeman, Scot Gardner, Zoe Ghani, Erin Gough, Laura Greaves, Jacqueline Harvey, Chloe Higgins, Luke Johnson, Will Kostakis, Harry Laing, John Larkin, Catherine Pelosi, James Knight, Ben Peek, Oliver Phommavanh, Adam Wallace.



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 celebrated, 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. Working annually with approximately 100 professional writers and upwards of 70 partners including teachers, schools, universities, community and arts organisations we commission new work and deliver residencies, fellowships, workshops, performances, presentations and publications.



WestLit Libraries is a partnership between WestWords and Western Sydney Zone libraries. The aim of the collaboration is to:

- expanding reach to new audiences (WS library zone has a reach of over 2 million, and to give an example, in 2014-15 Blacktown sees 1.4 million visitors a year, Children's programs – 1,107 a year with 50,642 attendings (includes carers), Young adult programs – 80 a year with 1,114 attendings,
- engaging new participants to our programs,
- increasing opportunities and visibility for writers, and WS writers in particular alone will promote, develop, and strengthen the sector.

Activities undertaken will include, but not be limited to:

- Coordinating travelling exhibitions of illustrators' work, author talks and skills development workshops across the region.

- Evaluating/benchmarking literature programs, resources and services in Western Sydney.
- Developing Writers Groups/Resident Authors for Library Services.
- Increasing the presence of local authors on Library shelves and in Library catalogues in Western Sydney.

Importantly with WestWords in a co-ordination role it will create cohesion and address key issues faced by writers and publishers when working independently with the library sector. In addition, by co-ordinating efforts, the libraries won't replicate internal processes across multiple libraries, resulting in cost reduction and additional opportunities for writers and their work. Importantly this partnership bridges gaps between the publishing, writers, and library sectors.

This project is proudly supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW as part of Arts Restart



Category
Sponsor
16-18yrs old



Proudly supported by the participating library services of



CAMPBELLTOWN



CUMBERLAND
CITY COUNCIL

PENRITH
CITY LIBRARY



CITY OF
PARRAMATTA
LIBRARIES

LIVERPOOL
CITY COUNCIL

BLUE
MOUNTAINS
LIBRARY

CANTERBURY
BANKSTOWN

Living Stories Western Sydney Writing Prize 2021 Overall winning and highly commended entries

10-12yrs

Winner: *Are We Here Yet?* Claudia Wong

Highly Commended: *The Girl on the Front Porch* Amy Jia

13-15yrs

Winner: *Ode to my Brown Body* Sofia Saeed

Highly Commended: *Saved by Western Sydney* Bronte Pagano

16-18yrs

Winner: *Reflections* Munira Tabassum Ahmed

Highly Commended: *Dinner at the Leung's* Sophina Xu

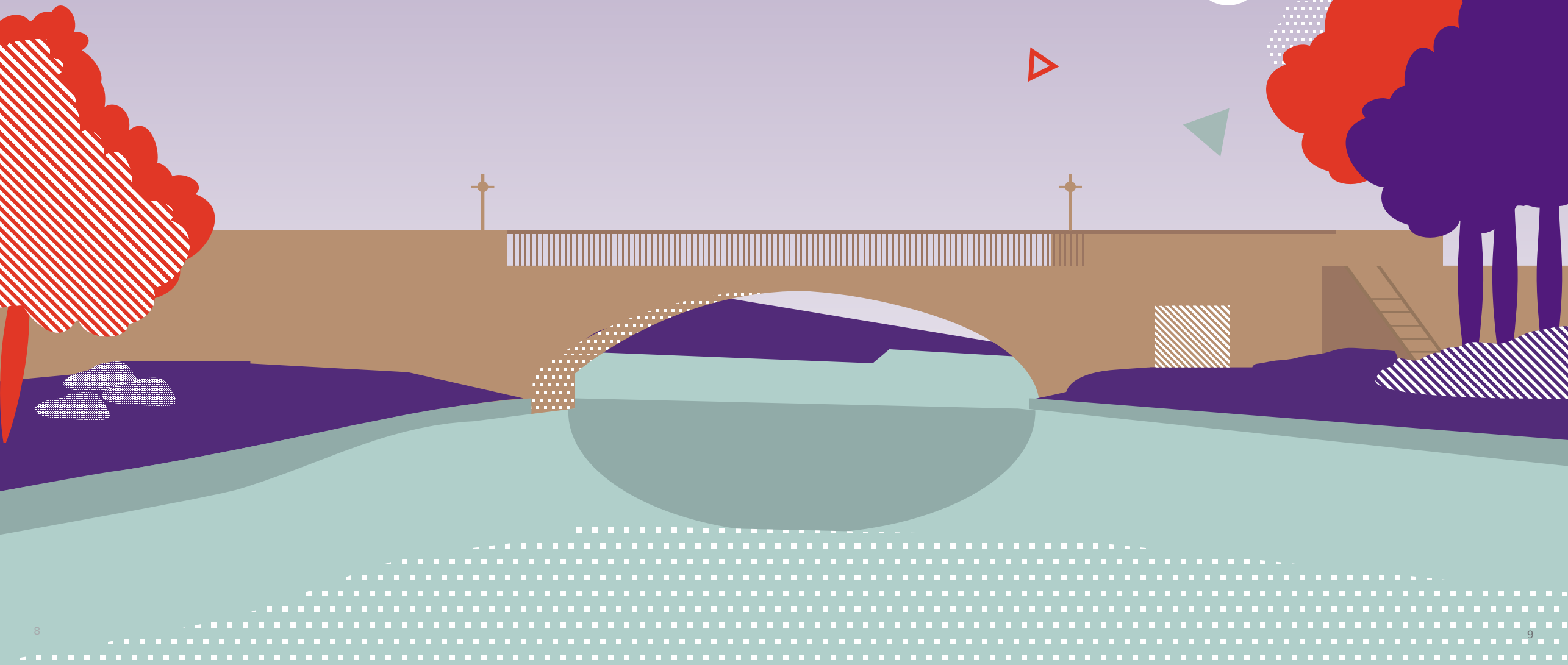
18+

Winner: *Linh's Key Cutting Service* Pete Schmigel

Highly Commended: *Tissue Paper Heart* Finola Methven



Living Stories Highly Commended



Are We Here Yet?

BORIS PROKHOROV | BLACKTOWN

We have open bitumen roads,
And creeks dry of water.
We have concrete Jungles,
We have nothing to owe,

But 'are we here yet' is still a dilemma

Are we looking after our environment,
Plastic and Poaching,
Is our end yet approaching?
Are we here yet,
Where are we now?
Are we looking after each other?
Are our governments,
Providing what's best for us?

Are we here yet,
Do we all have some safety?
Or do we just sleep empty?

Are we doing our best?
Are we doing everything we can?
Are we here yet?
So are we here at our Utopia,
Where the grass is green even on your own side?
Where we all live in friendship,
Not corruption or disruption.
Where everyone has a job to do,
And no one is just a powerless figure.

Where we aren't confined to what is accepted by our leaders.

Where we are treated like a society and not an individual.
Where we are acknowledged,
Where we are safe.
Where we are fearless from what we don't know.
So, Are we here yet?
There's still a long way to go, to be where we need to be.

Will We Ever Get There

NATASHA THOMPSON | BLUE MOUNTAINS

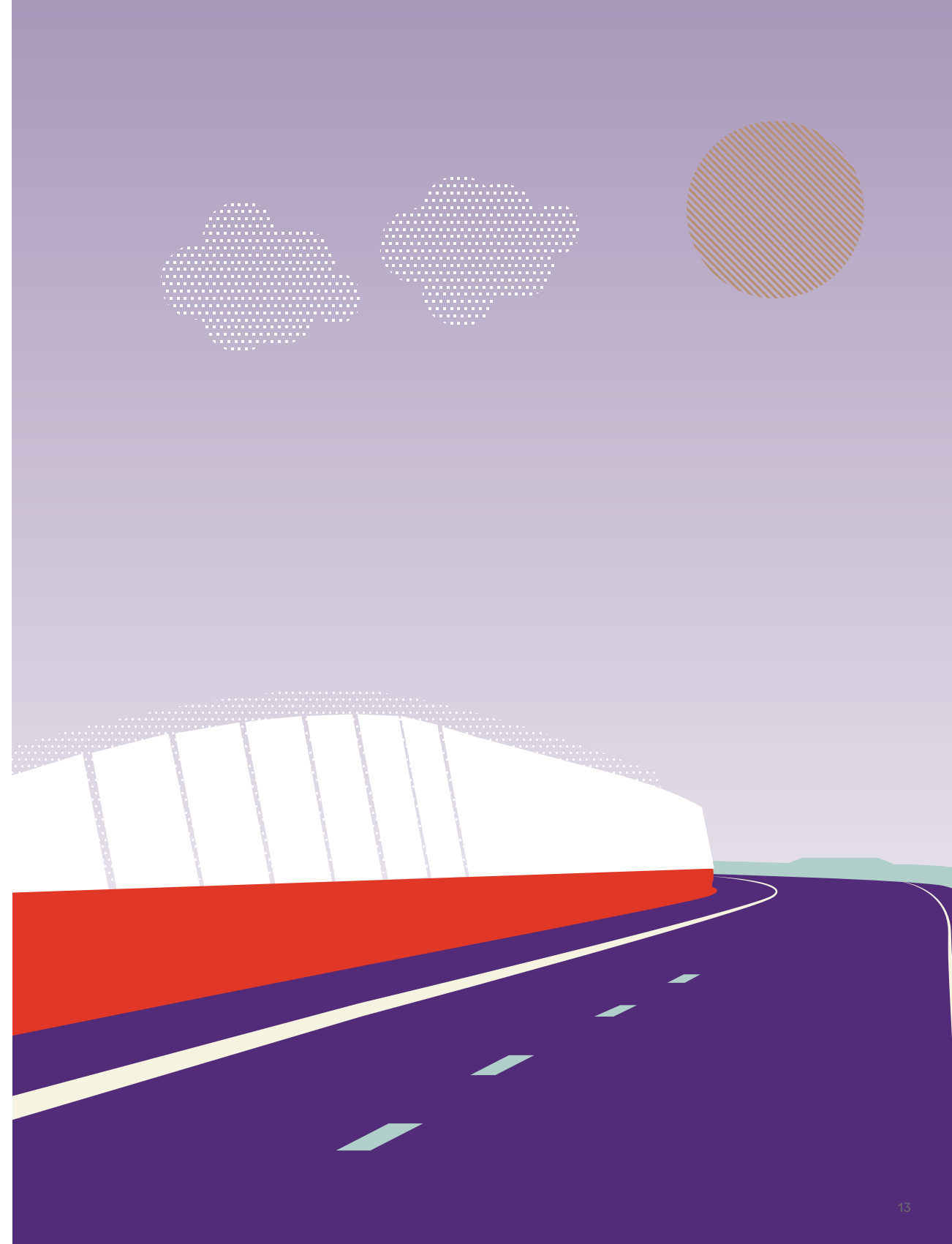
I long for another world where there is no one being judged for who they are, when it comes to what they're wearing, if they have a disability, or what colour their skin is. A world where there is no conflict between countries and people. There will be no war, no racism, no bullying, it will be peaceful. Creativity will be expressed everywhere, people will be treated equally and with respect, no matter what. Everywhere you go it will be happy, with birds always chirping. Everyone will have a job and they will be paid equally, they will have houses and their education will up to standard. The environment will be treated well with no pollution, the air will be pristine, and the animals will be well looked after.

But I snap to reality and realise that people are being judged for who they are, and there is conflict between both people and countries, and the amount of racism and bullying that is going on is sickening! People are even being paid differently because of their gender, people are also being abused and sometimes they can't call out for help. Even if there is a helpline for those who are being physically and mentally abused, helplines can't always help and sometimes those people don't even have access to electronics. I often ask myself if we are there yet, to a whole new world, and my response is no. But even though the world's not perfect, it's not that bad. People will always be unkind, but as long as we stick by each other and we support each other then we will get through it.

Are We There Yet by Saving the World?

ESHAL MALIK | CAMPBELLTOWN

I always thought I could do something to help the world out. Maybe I could've tried to encourage people who participated in environmental activism... but I didn't. I tried to put a stop to pollution by making posters, getting the word online all by myself. Anytime anybody asked if I needed help, I would refuse angrily. After several years of trying, was I there yet? No. I wasn't anywhere close. Nobody took me seriously. Was it my fault? Yes. I couldn't do it because I refused to get help from others, told them to take their encouragement and help to somewhere else. I didn't get anywhere because of my rigged attitude. I honestly felt after that major failure, I couldn't achieve anything. I tried to fix my behaviour, be nicer and help the world out by signing environmental saving petitions to help people save the environment... but was I saving anything at all? No. Eventually, I got tired of thinking of myself as a failure. This time, I tried to stop pollution with the help of other anti-pollution supporters. My message, no, our message got through to other people. Was I there yet? Yes. But that's not all I wanted to do. Was global warming taken care of? No. Were people's insecurities gone? No. Was poverty ended? Not at all. Were people treated fairly? No. So to the world, are we there yet? Have we helped in every possible way? No. But we all can contribute to making a difference. The world knows not everything can be completely taken care but if we all know what we can and need to do, hopefully we can make this world a better place. Ask yourself, ask the world, are we there yet? People will always be unkind, but as long as we stick by each other and we support each other then we will get through it.



Are We Here Yet?

ARSHIA NOSHER | CANTERBURY BANKSTOWN

Boom, bang, thud.

"Wake up, wake up, Ava!" Mum was shaking me. "We have to move now!"

She told me to put my stuff together and asked me to hurry up. It was a shock for me, so I started crying while packing up. We got a taxi, and it was time to leave. I was lost trying to find the answers to my questions, while tears were rolling down my cheeks silently.

Mum looked at me and wiped my tears off, lovingly.

"It's going to be okay, my dear. Don't worry," she said weakly.

I asked where we were going at the beginning of the ride. Mum answered, "To the airport."

Ten minutes later I asked "Are we there yet?" No answer so I had to ask again in a louder tone. I still did not get an answer, so I just continued staring out the window.

"Bye bye Syria," I whispered.

I sighed and looked at mum. Then Mum said that "We are here" so we started walking towards the airport.

We rented a hotel because the plane was not leaving until tomorrow. I was so sad, that I didn't even want to talk about anything. Mum went out, and I noticed that I was alone in the room now, just hoping that she hadn't abandoned me.

A while later the door opened. I was glad that it was Mum. She told me that she went to grab something to eat, apologising for not letting me know, and she

gave me a warm hug. It made me feel nice and cosy. Together we finished the dinner and headed for the bed.

"It's time for our flight," Mum whispered in my ear.

Rubbing my eyes, I woke up.

"Look, that's our plane!"

"Hurry!"

We got to the gate just in time and boarded the plane.

"Are we there yet?"

This time, mum answered, "Not long."

Looking out of the window, I slowly drifted to sleep.

"Mum, why did you choose to come to Mexico?" I asked as we got off the plane.

Mum smiled at me, as we were getting off. She was expecting one of her friends in Mexico to help settle in and find a good job until we could get our visa to enter America.

Aunt Mary picked us up from the airport and we finally reached our new home. She was so nice to set all the necessary things up for us. A few days and I was already feeling safe in my own place. Luckily, Mum got work as well.

I knew we were going to be here for a while. Every morning at nine, Mum left for work and returned at six in the evening, just in time to make food and put me to bed. Here I was, alone with the Spanish books, as I needed to learn Spanish to be adjusted to the school...

"Wake up, honey."

"Are we there yet?"

I opened my eyes, and remembered she was gone.

She wanted me to be safe from war and here I was, safe.



Are We Here Yet?

LILIAN CHEN | CUMBERLAND

Allison clambered into the back seat of the family's SUV. She wanted to stay behind and kiss the walls to her house goodbye one more time, water the roses in her pop's garden one more time and sleep in her bedroom one last time, but all of that was about to change.

Allison lived in Sydney in the city, she loved being a city girl where malls, boutiques and restaurants were the centre of her attention. Now she was going to say hello to the old Aussie outback where she would be introduced to horseback riding, farms and Indigenous cultures. Shivering at the thought of her new home, she buckled on her seatbelt as tears streamed down her face like a miniature waterfall. Was she ever going to see her beloved home again?

Hours passed as Allison thought about the ongoing journey. She didn't even notice when her mum pulled out the luggage at their destination. She was altogether too confused and upset about leaving her home.

"Are we here yet?" she asked.

TICK TOCK. As the old grandfather clock in their new hallway chimed the eleventh hour, Allison crept out of bed and stared outside at her new home. The sweet scent of the toasted cheese sandwiches she'd had for lunch filled her nostrils as she sat on the large oak windowsill. Nature was all around her, from the chirping of the western crickets to the slight moos of ranch cows in the distance. She loved the sweet scent of pine trees but she knew that she was deeply homesick to her surroundings. All she wanted to do right now was to go home to the city where her heart belonged. Allison yawned and

stretched her arms. She was going to have to wait for now. When will I ever get back home? she thought.

The sun rose, casting an odd light across Allison's dimly lit bedroom. She stared around her room. This was strange – it looked exactly like her room back in the city. Bewildered, she sat bolt upright and gasped. It was her bedroom back in the city which could only mean one thing...

BANG! Allison flew out of the door causing dinner napkins to fall off the table.

"MUM, DAD?" she gasped.

It was the kitchen of the city house they had lived in, with the familiar smell of cinnamon and the cutlery trolley that she used to love making music with. Mum and Dad were sitting at the oak dining table having a conversation.

Mum looked up and saw her daughter and smiled. "We knew you would hate it that we moved," said Allison's mum, who was stirring some apples on the stovetop for a pie. "So, we moved back to the city!"

Allison grinned and leaped over to hug her parents. This is where she truly belonged she thought, as a true sense of belonging overcame her. She was finally here now. Home sweet home, where the heart is.



Are We Here Yet? (A Narrative Poem)

SUSANNAH CODY | HAWKESBURY

The busy bee house was a clutter of chaos,
And a flurry and hurry of last minute packing.
Finally everything was stuffed in the car,
It was all just so good, great and exciting!
Anticipation bubbled up from their hearts,
With a warm sensation they would never forget,
They fidgeted like monkeys and laughed like hyenas,
And groaned "Mum and Dad, are we there yet?"

Their minds swirled with ideas about all the places to see,
The coral-encrusted ocean sparkling and glimmering,
A great terracotta rock looming over the rough terrain,
The rustle of a cassowary tall and bewildering,
A giant bight in the land, surrounded by shimmering seas,
Twelve giant limestones in front of a gorgeous sunset,
A famous bridge and shell covered, music filled house on a harbour.
Filled with joy, they squealed, "Mum and Dad, are we there yet?"

The Great Barrier Reef

A blur of watermelon, peach and strawberry pinks, and
Turquoise and jade coral beneath the Pacific Ocean.
Whilst fish skid across the highway in a great hurry,
And dolphins leap gracefully in a great motion,
With droplets of water sparkling on their rubber skin,
Then diving back down to the busyness below,
Where happiness and joy reign supreme,
And everything flows easy and mellow.

Uluru

The vast, vivid orange, dusty rock,
Deserted among the blood red sand.
Shrubs are scattered around a brown, boiling outback,
But there are animals that live there and are able to withstand,
The dry, arid and harsh conditions of the rough topography,
And this sacred site has lived through the toughest weather,
Through hot and cold and rain and sunshine,
This proud Aussie icon stays with us forever,

The Daintree Rainforest

Thick green vines coil up the trunks of emerald trees,
Like a gigantic, green python constricting its prey.
Butterflies flutter through a soft, white mist,
Sweet and pure, they frolic and play.
Rushing and gushing and splashing and splashing,
Light rainfall leads to icy rivers that are all around.
The red torch ginger flower and hibiscus are proud of their colours,
And are symbolising hope and life that here is found.

They only had time to kiss them goodbye,
And in one blink of an eye they were gone.
In this they felt a mixture of heartache,
But they had no time to feel forlorn,
When they thought of the good times they spent with their friends,
With a warm sensation they would never forget.
All the tropics and oceans and grasslands and deserts.
Then they sighed, "Mum and Dad, are we home yet?"



The Long Road Trips

CEDRIC CHIU | THE HILLS

January 24th 9:13pm 2012

Today was such a long day. My neck ached and my stomach was gurgling wildly. I felt so sick after that long road trip to Florida, and we are not even close to finishing! Right now, me and my mother, dad and brother are staying in a motel, just for tonight. All of them are snoring loudly while I am wide awake and secretly writing in my diary. Luckily, I have my phone with me, and it is my only source of light.

Actually, I am kind of tired so I'm going to sleep now. Goodnight.

January 25th 10:36am 2012

My eyes were hurting this morning. I was woken up by a loud sound, I didn't know what it was, I just wanted to sleep. The same noise kept waking me up. I was so annoyed. I was so tired from yesterday's trip. I got off the bed I was sleeping on and started to walk across the room tiredly. It was all a blur; my eyes had bags over them and were not focused enough. There were presents scattered on the floor; it took me a moment to process this information when I came to realise it was my BIRTHDAY! Still tired, I did a little dance and soon collapsed on the floor and continued sleeping. It was 30 minutes later that we continued our way on our trip to Florida. After many hours of driving, my brother started whining again. After all, it's not unusual for an 8-year-old boy to whine.

"Are we here yet? Are we here yet? Are we here yet? Are we here yet? Are we here yet?"

He only said that because he didn't know the correct word to say. Instead of "here" it should be "there."

With me and my parents suffering from his blood curdling squawking today and yesterday, we were finally there, after suffering for six hours...

We were there.

Up

MADELEINE LI | PARRAMATTA

As soon as I planted my feet firmly in the dirt, I knew I was ready. It was time to go to Up. Up was the place that fully-grown-ups went to, and I just couldn't wait.

I was currently crouched down, preparing for this journey. First my arms reached towards the sky, then my head. Slowly and over time, I managed to straighten my long, thin body. By this time only my legs were still bent.

The sweltering sun beat down on my tired limbs, it was Summer after all. But though I felt like I was burning, I had to keep going. I had to reach Up. Many thoughts swirled in my minuscule mind. How long would it take? Would I even be able to reach Up before the sun killed me? I couldn't let these worries and doubts destroy me.

I only had one chance, like all the other younglings around me. Also, just before, one of the others had made it a race to get to Up first. And everyone joined in.

Close up...

"Go!" I could imagine the voice of one of the other younglings exclaiming. Everyone stretched up as far as possible, moving towards Up, bit by bit. It would have been very slow for You to watch, but it was break-neck speed for me. Still the scorching Summer sun laughed down at us, trying to keep every youngling from reaching their common goal.

Reaching, stretching. Stretching, reaching. Making our way to Up. I had to – just had to – win this race to be the first to Up. I had to.

Determination powered through my veins, pushing me further and further. Past the slower younglings, past the faster younglings, then past them all. I would win this race. Just as I passed the last of the others, I realised something. I had no idea at all what Up looked or felt like. I wondered whether I was there yet, or had passed it.

Was I there yet?

No. I wasn't. I looked towards the sky again, squinting at all of those younglings before me who had already made it to Up. There. That was where I needed to get to. That was Up.

The other younglings behind me were all awestruck at my sudden burst of speed. I was already considered the slowest, now I was the fastest. I would not let Them down. I had only just remembered Them. How could I forget?

But I had to put Them aside for now, as I needed to focus on reaching Up. Closer and closer, almost there... The laughing sun was now staring at me, watching silently as I climbed towards Up.

When I finally reached Up, Spring and Summer had passed. I knew I hadn't let Them down. The ones that I came from.

As for You, You would never understand my life. The pain of never meeting Them. Flowers and leaves have never sprouted from You before. But that is how those of my kind live.

Becoming a Hero

AARNA GUPTA | PENRITH

As the sun shone on the busy city, two sisters lay miles away gazing at the stars as they brushed their teeth. The town where the children lived was extremely dull and life there only included eating, learning and sleeping. The two siblings would bore themselves out day to day and soon life become much duller than before.

Their mum Rachel knew that all the children needed to change their lives was an exciting adventure filed with action-packed activities. So the next day at work she applied for a week off and then headed to school and decided to pick her girls up early. As soon as she picked them up the twins began asking questions that made Rachel's head spin so she put them out of their misery and told them the exciting news. They were going to Hawaii!

"We are going on a one week holiday," Rachel announced. The twins stood there looking blankly at their mother. "What's a holiday?" the twins pondered. After explaining everything to Rachel and her kids Emma and Lucy set off on the twins' first adventure!

The road trip to the airport was incredibly fun and enjoyable. The twins chanted "Are we there yet?" several times. They laughed and joked around at many things they had never seen before. Rachel grinned from ear to ear seeing the happiness on their faces. The plane flight was just as humorous as the road trip and soon their cheeks became sore from laughing.

After arriving at their hotel they began to explore the city. They visited several festivals and then became so lost in the crowd that Emma and Lucy lost their mother! Emma began crying loudly and attracted attention from all the other tourists. Lucy in the meantime ignored her sister and began searching for Rachel. She didn't need to look too far as Rachel suddenly stood next to her and poked her on the back. They went to fetch Emma who was crying behind a large bushy tree.

The three walked abreast and then came to a veteran who was sitting alone in the darkness. Emma rushed forward to make sure he was all right and wasn't hurt. Lucy and Rachel scrambled after her and placed themselves next to the veteran. Emma began to try and talk to the veteran and made sure he was alive. He gave signals of breathing and managed to tell them what had happened. Rachel immediately understood that the veteran was hurt and needed to be sent to hospital at once.

Emma stayed with him and the other two went to inform the hospital. Emma began asking the soldier for his name and other information. His voice was feeble and Emma's voice suddenly trembled, with a tone of worry rising. Minutes later the doctors took the veteran away and the three superstars walked away smiling that they helped someone!

What a day!



Are We Here Yet?

FEDORA AHMAD | BLACKTOWN

Imani was sitting in her history class, bored out of her mind. Just as she was about to doze off, a particular phrase dragged her out of her stupor:

"... and slaves were allowed much freedom, their masters often took them out for outings."

Imani immediately sat up and gaped at her teacher incredulously. As her teacher continued, Imani's outrage started building. Finally, she burst out, "You're wrong!"

Her teacher looked up from the textbook. "Do you have anything to add?" asked the teacher.

"My grandma said slaves were mistreated and tortured; why does the book lie?"

"Your grandma must be mistaken," stated her teacher coldly. Please refrain from interrupting the class."

Imani sank back into her chair, the injustice of the exchange resonating.

At home, Imani collapsed onto the couch and started switching through the channels. She was still thinking about the exchange with her teacher. Why were they being taught the wrong history?

Suddenly, something caught her attention:

"...and Black Lives Matter protesters are wreaking havoc all around the world. After the murder of George Floyd, people are bringing the mistreatment of black people over the decades to the surface." Imani was euphoric; people were finally waking up! Black mistreatment was finally ending!

Over the next few weeks, Imani noticed more protests and many activists speaking up to make a change. She started to become hopeful. But one evening, all the progress came crashing back down.

"Another attack on an innocent black man has left BLM protesters furious. Daante Wright was shot dead by cop Kim Potter, who said she mistook her gun for a taser."

Imani stared in horror at the TV. After a few minutes of stunned silence, she started shouting, cursing, insulting the police, causing the neighbours to peek through their windows. Her parents tried calming her down, but nothing. Eventually, one suggestion made her quiet down.

"Fine."

* * *

Imani's hands were sweating as she stepped up to the podium. The protesters looked up at her, slightly annoyed but curious to what she was about to say.

"Um... I'm Imani. Sorry to interrupt, but I have something important to say." As Imani spoke, her confidence grew. "On May 17th, 1954, most racial segregation ended. December 1st, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. On August 28th, 1963, Martin Luther King gave his renowned 'I have a dream' speech. All these milestones in the journey to eradicate discrimination, and yet here we are. We must ask ourselves, are we here yet? Of course not. Are we ready to fight for as long as it takes? Of course!"

The crowd roared in agreement with her words.

"This is a war, not a single fight. We must fight until every single black person is treated with the respect they deserve. We might not be here yet, but we will fight to the end."

And with these last words, Imani was finally convinced that they were making progress.

Flashing Lights

ROBYN BRIGGS | CAMPBELLTOWN

The taste of metal is still fresh in my mouth as I drive down the near empty highway, headlights around me seem to be the only source of humanity. "Are we here yet?" I hear my baby doll gurgle.

I look in my mirror and smile at her, she's playing with one of her toys and making faces.

"Yes bubba, almost there," I tell her, smiling while reaching back to squeeze her leg, and she squeals.

I check the road ahead of me, it feels surreal how pitch black it looks.

"Bubba you should go sleepy," I say to her, hoping it gives me more time.

I hear her grumble behind me, then go quiet. I once again look in the mirror, she's fighting off sleep; I just hope she falls asleep before we get there.

I turn off the main highway, the road seems to be deserted, the street lights hugging the road are either dim or off completely, my headlights are the only source of brightness.

I sigh to myself, was the trip even worth it?

I watch the trees zoom past us, at this time of night everything looks almost the same.

It's freaky.

Suddenly I see something. Ahead of me. Flashing blue and red lights bounce off the trees.

My heart races. We don't have any stations down this road.

As the car comes closer it slows down, and once it passes me it turns onto my lane, flashing its lights still. I pull over.

I sit silently waiting for them to come to my window, I look back, bubba is sleeping.

The man comes to the window and knocks, I open it quickly. Signalling to the sleeping baby. He nods.

"Where are you going tonight sir?" he asks softly.

"Home, it's a couple more minutes down here sir," I respond looking back down the dark road.

"I'm sorry sir, we're closing this road now," he explains, stepping back from my window.

My heart pounds in my chest.

"What happened officer?" I quickly ask, putting my hands on the wheel ready to speed off if need be.

"Number 31, a young woman was murdered, we're not sure yet how long she's been dead suspect may still be in the area."

Without thinking I step on the gas and speed ahead. Please tell me he got the number wrong, please anything.

"Are we here yet," I mumble to myself mimicking my baby in hope it brings some calm.

It takes me less time than it should to get down to my house. Cop cars surround the yard, as well as an ambulance.

My heart breaks.

How did they find her? I thought I had hidden well enough.

Are We Here Yet?

KATIE NGUYEN | FAIRFIELD

Drip. Drop.

A quiet place where only sounds of water can be heard along with a soft beeping sound. Where is it coming from? A metallic rusty smell coming from the edge of the corner coming to my nose. Only a spot of light is lighting rays onto me. A pitch black space where only I can see myself glowing in the dark. My hands, legs and body are black and white in colour. I snort brittlely from the sight of it. When I move, I feel as light as a feather as I lift my body up. So weightless and free as if I am floating in space, it makes me feel empty inside.

I see overlapping large screens circling around me, I shift my gaze back and forth. Behind the screens, I see films of a young boy from being a kid to adolescent years. Colours are so clear behind the screen, joyful moments and sounds can clearly be heard.

Where am I? Where is this place? Did I... die?

As I continue to watch the screens overlapping with several scenes, I burst forward and glare at the screens in front of me. The scenes from the past won't stop playing in my head, as if I am stuck in a cursed cycle. Water droplets continue dripping from the top of my head. I feel the moist and wetness filling the ground.

"Is anyone here?!" I yell as loud as I can, repeatedly. Gasping for air, anxiety subconsciously grows seeping into my chest. It almost feels like ages, I continue to desperately call out. The more I watch the screen, the more anxious I felt.

Finally, I see a child coming out of a pitch black shadow. The petite looking child staring right through me like my reflection, except that the child is filled in bright glowing colours. Behind the child's reflection of those eyes, I see guilt, desperation, confusion, sorrow, hatred and regret flooding in my eyes.

"Who... are you?" I ask curiously.

The child does not move until it slightly raises its hand, pointing to itself. Then, rotating his wrist 180 degrees, the child's index finger points to me. I see the child's mouth opening to speak. I hear a voice, it is loud but blurry, I cannot hear what it is trying to tell me. The child's voice overlap with the screens around me. Although it is blurred, due to its familiarity, I definitely recognise this voice.

But just what is it trying to tell me?

A white light suddenly appears and shines blindly to my eyes as I use my arms reflexively to cover it.

I want to leave.

I open my eyes widely feeling the sense of warmth, I see myself on a comfortable bed. People with familiar faces that I barely see are around me. Their concerned and troubled faces are revealed. Feeling someone's gaze on me, all I know is that, I am now back.

Are We Here Yet?

BULAT KHAERTDINOV | LIVERPOOL

I was only eleven years old when my family broke the news. One evening when Mum came home from work, she exclaimed excitedly, "We are going to Australia!"

It finally came together. For months Mum and Dad showed us pictures of a golden land with kangaroos jumping everywhere and a beautiful turquoise ocean wrapping the rugged coastline. They also promised I would be speaking another language, which felt like having a superpower at the time. They promised to buy me things I could not imagine having.

They promised I would be going to the best school and have many new friends from different countries. The pictures and the promises were closer to reality. "Hooray!" was my response to the news; it felt like I had won the lottery.

The night of the flight, we stayed at our grandparents' apartment. I couldn't sleep, and I was so excited that I could feel my heart beating through my chest. Finally, when it was one hour until our flight, for the last time, I kissed my grandma on the cheek, and for the last time, I hugged my grandpa real hard, and for the last time, I sat in his car, as we drove to the airport.

The journey to Australia was of many "firsts" and many surprises. For a boy who'd never left his hometown and never flown on a plane, the giant monster of a Boeing 777 flapping its wings, about to take me to the enchanted land was like a scene from a sci-fi movie. I still remember standing in front of the gate, powerless and mesmerised, holding Dad's hand as hard as possible.

The journey to the green continent took us 33 hours, and upon arrival in Australia, everything I knew had changed for me.

Things looked different.

Things smelled different.

Things *felt* different.

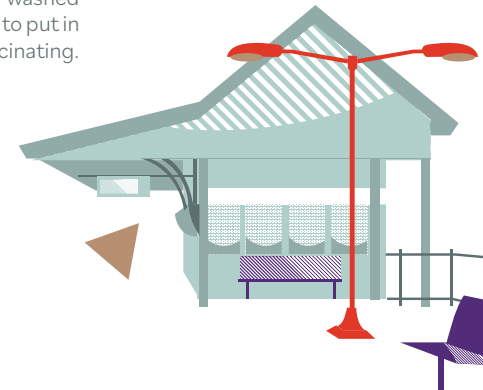
During our car ride from the airport, I could not take my eyes off rows of stand-alone houses with beautiful lawns and big blocks of land. I started dreaming about having our yard with a garden and a big shed where I could work with my dad.

And then, there was the food. Australian food was a journey on its own. We discovered fast food and moved from boiled potatoes to big bags of pre-cooked potato chips, not a healthy option by far, but it represented the new, Western lifestyle, and we loved every bite of it.

Touching plastic banknotes was the most fun thing in the world; we washed them, we tried to tear them, we wanted to fold them in a hundred layers to put in a pocket, or we tried to guess the identities of people on them. It was fascinating.

So it has been four years since we arrived. Finally, the pictures and the promises have come into reality. I speak another language. My parents got me the things they promised. I attend a good school, and I have friends from different countries. The green continent has become my new place of residence.

But, at times, I still feel like a tourist. Well, I guess it has not been long enough and will take time to adapt and adjust fully. And when that time comes, I will proudly call Australia home.



For The Record

LEA SUMABAT | PENRITH

For the record, he always loved swimming.
It shimmers with the wonders of life as he dives into the ocean,
A second goes by as air lightly kisses his skin.
Now hugged by seemingly endless water.

Cycles of dawn and dusk go by like a song on repeat,
In his eyes, every action deemed insignificant and insufficient,
In comparison to suns and moons of the universe.
Trying to love any crook or cranny from countless cities to ceaseless seas.
What's the point in living when he's only faced with waves of pain?

He looks towards the water, taking one last jump.
Yet, he felt betrayed as even his shadow left him to drown in the darkness of a
meaningless ocean.
Everything is so twisted the same water that hugged him attacks his lungs in a
murderous obsession.
The water lost all elegance, no longer shimmering instead still, dull and dismal...

He looks up as light fades.
Yet even now, after all these rotten repeating days,
He always loved swimming...

Are we there yet?

For the record, they used to gaze upon their lucky stars.
They used to dance on roofs as stars dotted the night skies.
They used to make memories with pride as if they were on top of the world.

Yet, alone she walked endless spiralling stairs
Hearing memories of good old days,
It all seems too soon but yet long lost history.
To her, his death all but a mystery.
Sad memories are wicked, but happy ones are easily the worst,
Grief gnawed at her heart.
No longer does she stare at the stars,
Barely taking her eyes off her feet to look at the city.

Sydney, the city they called home, here life goes on as he did not.
Their lights start to flicker off just as his life once did.

Standing on the roof, they shared...
Sharing her last dance with the Grim Reaper...
Smiling at her last memoir...
Taking one last step: her head kisses the ground.

Her light flicked off just as his once did.
Yet even now, after all these rotten repeating days,
They gaze upon their lucky stars...
They dance on the roof as the stars dot the skies...
They make memories with pride as if they were on top of the world...

Are we there yet?

For the record, they always hung by torpid threads.
Unchecked emotions crawled beneath their skin.
Morbid thoughts thrashed around in their brain.
They silently scream in their prisons of pain.

Still, they don a simulated smiling mime.
Even when they try to haul a small spoonful of savorless slop to their stomach as gravity
works overtime.
Even when they struggle to get out of bed as life proceeds to pull them down.
Even when they are more scarred than their wrists is as memories run down their
cheeks, they fight on.

Yet even now, After all these rotten repeating days,
They continue to hang by torpid threads...

Are we there yet?



Are We Here Yet?

LINDA CAMILLERI | BLACKTOWN

Day 98 of trying to find civilisation. In ninety-eight days, we have travelled from the rural outskirts of Sydney into the thrumming heart of the city. The cool tarmac beneath my skin wakes me up. I am pleasantly surprised to notice the sky a light lavender colour with furious streaks of orange through it, I could be fooled the world was not in the middle of ending. The air is thin and filled with the smell of diesel. Kyla yawns before rubbing her beautiful emerald eyes.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” I whisper while pinching her cheeks. She was only three when the first virus was released, and come to think of it, she has never seen the world with all of its wonder and beauty intact. As we pack our bags, I think about how much she has grown in the six years without our family.

“Where are we even going?” Kyla exhales.

I’m about to answer when something crunches under my foot. As I look down, I am presented with a well-preserved flyer.

SAFE HAVEN, it reads as the header. Warm drops of water slide off my face and onto the paper. The address on the flyer is close too! If I sprinted, I could make it there by midday, but to accommodate for Kyla too, I would say I could be there by six in the evening latest. “Sean?” Kyla whimpers before something heavy thumps onto the concrete. Oh no! My heart thuds in my chest, dropping like lead. I spin as swiftly as I can but she has already dropped into unconscious. As I pick her up, I see her lips are already turning a deep violet,

her skin icy. She slumps over my shoulder; limp and lifeless. My tears of happiness have now quickly turned to panic. The copper arch of the Harbour Bridge becomes clear in the distance.

I’ve seen it happen. This virus, parasite even, eats its victims from the inside out and kills anything living around it. I feel my cheeks becoming hot while I glance down at the flyer. This bunker is nine blocks away. If this so-called ‘safe haven’ does not have the antidote, if this disease murders my baby sister, I would not be able to live with myself. She’s becoming heavy on my back. My sprint becomes a jog, and my jog becomes a walk. I look at the tarnished silver watch that is sitting loose on my skinny wrist. While I walk past the scraps of metal that were once cars, I think about how it was only a few years ago we were at a family picnic and my grandmother gave me this. I miss them. First, it was Pop’s, then Gran, then Mum and Dad. Eventually, it was only the people with impeccable health that had survived.

Kyla shudders on my shoulder with a small cough which makes me realise how far I have come. I was almost seven blocks from the bridge.

“Oh my goodness! You scared me to death, don’t do that again!” I exclaim, sounding more upset than I intended.

“Are we almost there yet?” she coughs, and I try to laugh through the tears. I look at the sign above us as Kyla slips off of my shoulders – we’re only two blocks away.

A tall building greets us. It’s the only place with electricity in the whole city, possibly even the world. We glance at each other and walk in. The bright white building is crawling with people in slick black and pink uniforms. We are greeted by a middle-aged woman with the name badge Sara.

I simply bend down and whisper, “I think we’re here now.”



Cuddalore

RADHA SRINIVAS | CUMBERLAND

Last summer holidays, with months to go before school would once again keep me occupied, I became a defiant and bored teenager who decided that partying and hanging out with friends were a good way to spend my time. My parents, alarmed that their mild-mannered daughter was becoming an out-of-control wreck, intervened with the arbitrary authority only they could exercise. So, they sent me back to India to my grandma's place to stay for two months. I was a rude fifteen-year-old girl when I first came to Cuddalore to visit my grandma.

As a city-girl who was used to the bright fluorescent lights and to imposing skyscrapers which loomed over the city, to billboards of flashing neon signs, the small village with its ancient simplicity appalled me. My grandma's house was an unembellished wooden structure. The trailing vines of pink honeysuckle and the continuous buzz of bees merely offended my senses which were used to the robotic tones of advertisements spruiking the latest in gadgetry and fashion. I was overcome by a cloud of oppression as I contemplated the two months of isolation in this place, which seemed to have been bypassed by progress.

Ammama – my grandma – was a woman who strongly believed that urban-living had destroyed her petti's capacity to see into the spirits that lurk inside of all human souls, Athman, she called it – an understanding that life often and explicitly brought misery and suffering even to those who seemed to have nothing but good fortune. So she had made

it her mission to remind me of my innate connections to the world of malicious spirits like Goddess Kali and the need to live life prepared for ill-fortune.

One morning, when heavy clouds cast a dark pall on her restless granddaughter, Ammama said, "Come on, we're going out. There's something you need to see."

I was about to protest, but the determined expression on Ammama's face silenced me. So I allowed myself to be dragged out in the moist morning air, which wrapped us like misty shrouds of ghostly fingers.

Together, we walked on, my grandma maintaining a resolute silence, and I was shaken by such irrational fears that I could not utter a single sound. It wasn't long before Ammama stopped and pointed ahead. There, rising out of the mist, was a derelict Aghara-style house, the deep luxurious colour of terracotta standing out amongst the moldy water stains like scars on the skin. The doors' intricately carved symbols showed images of wealth and affluence. It spoke of abandonment, of human lives, defeated by nature, and it was a tragic reminder that nothing in life is certain.

Ammama prodded me forward, through the gate, and onto the enormous portico in front of the house. She pointed up towards words that had been etched over the front door:

Artha (Success and Prosperity) - the Keys to happiness

Then she said, in a voice full of irony, "They learnt too late that they were wrong!"

My curiosity was aroused by this.

Genii Loci

MEGAN CHEUNG | THE HILLS

(foreigner - whatever that means)

hungry

bustling noodle shops
discoloured weather-board houses
the lingering smell of fish
sauce in the air

still a place for satisfying desires
traditional recipes
passed through generations,
kindling the family spirit.

people

unfamiliar faces
frosty glares

pupils that shone like the void.

recipe

for a diverse community-
35 grams Vietnamese vermicelli
9 grams Cambodian dried fish
5 ml traditional Chinese soy sauce
2 kaffir limes from Thailand
and 2 bamboo shoots-
Laotian

(resident)

文化 văn hóaⁱ

chinese?
not only.
cabra culture
simple yet diverse

the smell of incinerating joss paper
whose prayers plague the streets.
fortune, prosperity, longevity?
work hard, or pray harder.

人們 mọi ngườiⁱⁱⁱ

nǐ hǎo, xin chàoⁱⁱⁱ
friendly familiar faces
smiles once known.

食物 món ăn^{iv}

food tastes best made with passion
pho^v, cơm^{vi}, cà phê đá^{vii}
though they say
ā mǎ's eternal love is always triumphant.

i culture - 文化 Wénhuà (Chinese); văn hóa (Vietnamese)

ii people - 人們 Rénmen (Chinese); mọi người (Vietnamese)

iii hello - 你好 Nǐ hǎo (Chinese); xin chào (Vietnamese)

iv food - 食物 Shíwù (Chinese); món ăn (Vietnamese)

v pho - vietnamese beef noodles

vi cơm - broken rice

vii cà phê đá - vietnamese iced coffee with condensed milk

Are We Here Yet?

HARRY LE | FAIRFIELD

I climbed out of the cool, crisp lake. “Ahhh,” happily I sighed. It was dawn, the sun was shining on the cold water, and I couldn’t help but grin as I took in fresh air through my nostrils and out of my mouth. A bit chilly, but lovely today, I stood up naked before sunrise. It was better than any holiday. I threw my cloak, ambled back to my fire, enjoying some coffee by the sizzling, burning coals of the previous night.

When I was a boy, my grandpa got arthritis in his late 60s. It was weakening and his life was changing. He would wake up freely and ride his bike before sunset every day. Pain traveled with him wherever he went and it took him a few moments to move. The agony was excruciating and he had to surrender everything to live. He couldn’t raise his arms above his head and he was exhausted from trying to walk. My parents urged him to look after himself better, but he was never asked what was important to him. He told the doctor what he wanted for the future, how important it was going outside for him, socialising and having fun with his family, but was instead told he had to lay in his bed for the rest of his days. I realised how bad the condition was affecting him mentally, as well as physically. Seasons passed and he, unfortunately, passed as well, exhaling his last breath wishing he’d enjoy and live life to its full capacity.

Emotions overcame my thoughts, as I reflected upon what he’d said from his hospital bed, a few days before his passing.

“Are we here yet?”

I was quite confused as to who was talking to, but then he mentioned the name Margaret. She was his wife, who died due to a tumour that was in enclosed within her brain, leaving my grandfather with depression, and lost with no purpose in life. I knew his life is slipping away, and he dreamt of heaven and the fantasies it brings. Taking this experience as it recurred within my consciousness, it resonated with me with something he once told me: “You only live once, so live life to its fullest.”

Thick brown clouds covered the west, illuminated by the sun. The landscape looked like a brilliant ocean of green, with specks of yellow dandelions and white daisies dotting the waves of grass. Now it was as I’d always dreamt: just me, the lake, and a brilliant life.

16-18

Highly Commended

Hopeful Destinations

SIMADRA FAYYADH | LIVERPOOL

The oblivion of a child is a blessing, especially for a child born in poverty.
Let's embark on a journey of suffering and hope.
A journey marked not by its beginning... but by its destination.

It is the year 2005. Place? Amman, Jordan.

A woman walks down the road, a wailing bundle in her arms, only a few months old. Do you see the anguish on their faces?

She stops before a house. Ramshackle. Windows unhinged. Walls crumbling. Pavement cracked. Look around. All the houses mirror one another.

The woman reaches the door. Hesitates. Looks at the babe. Looks back at the door. Knocks twice.

Another woman opens the door. They embrace, exchange words.

The woman with the babe, tears now staining her face, remains outside as the other woman returns to the house.

A moment, an eternity, passes.

The woman resurfaces and presents two Jordanian dinars (three dollars in Australian currency) to the woman and her babe, who both continue to cry. The woman accepts the money and takes off a ring, her wedding ring, and presents it to the other woman as repayment. The other woman shakes her head, declining.

They embrace again.

The woman takes her babe and walks away, her strides purposeful and much more swift.

She reaches a pharmacy and enters. An exchange of money and products takes place.

The woman exits, a can of powdered milk in her hands. The babe sucks on a bottle filled with milk. Finally sated.

Two winters have passed. The babe has bloomed into a little girl.

She sits at a park besides her mother and a man who must be her father — they share the same eyes.

Does the girl know what her parents had endured? Surely she will know someday, once she is older. Or would the atrocities of Iraq be too dreadful for even her older self to hear about? Fleeing to another country did nothing to prevent the shadows of Iraq from haunting them.

Do you notice how they weigh the mother and father down? Look at them. Clothes dirty. Faces bleak. Eyes famished. They still have not escaped the cycle of poverty that threatens to consume them.

And yet, things are not as terrible as they seem. For a grain of hope has been planted in their hearts.

The girl is four springs old now. She cannot sleep. The prospect of the unknown has piqued her curiosity. The idea of a better life has left her restlessly happy, with a smile blossoming on her lips. Indeed, a greater life beckons the girl and her family, a life that they travel closer to with each passing second that the airplane spends in the air. They are soaring in the sky, as free and hopeful as any bird.

The plane lands. Passports are stamped. Bags are collected. They have arrived. Australia.

The first rays of dawn shine on them as they exit the doors into the airport.

Unfamiliar faces swarm her. Her parents laugh and cry as they embrace those people. The markings of a new beginning.

She has arrived. She is here. She is me.

Changing Fete

ARTELLE LENTHALL | BLACKTOWN

Prem and I were only at the meeting because we were too young to stay home, we didn't have readily accessible relatives. Fete planning finally began.

"We'll have the chocolate wheel, all right to call as usual, Doug?" said Mr Mills.

"Yeah Milsy, no worries."

"BBQ? Happy to cook Johnno?"

"Yeah mate."

"Plants? Mary?"

"Sorted Dave."

"Thanks love."

Mum stood. "Good evening, I am Teresa Gunekasara and we'd like to run a curry and rice stall."

"Look Mrs Guneruh. . . . we have the BBQ, Devonshire teas and canteen, that's plenty. Shall we close. . ."

"Let's hear Mrs Gunekasara out," said Fr. Louis.

Everyone slumped back into their seats.

Mum laid out plans. What we'd cook and sell, costs, possible profits. Around \$200.

"Yeah right."

"Dreamin'."

For months, Mum approached stores practically begging for donations and cut-price food. We stuffed and sealed samosas and painted signs. Our fridge and freezer were overflowing.

Set-up was the afternoon before the fete. Our faces fell. We'd been shoved down the back corner behind the hall. We'd be lucky to be seen, let alone sell anything.

"All that work. All our food wasted!" said Prem. I didn't know if he was angry about wasting food, the soccer playing time he'd missed, or something else. Whatever it was seemed to galvanise Mum.

"It's fine; the Good Lord will make everything all right."

We taped down electrical cords, put up tarpaulin, signs, and table-clothed trestle tables. It looked magnificent. We trudged out to our mustard coloured station wagon, past several dads leaning on semi-constructed stalls, drinking beers.

Fete day arrived. Those dads must have worked late into the night. Our school was transfigured! Colourful stalls, music, a loud speaker calling out numbers for chocolate wheel prizes. Classrooms became nurseries, cafes, haberdasheries – I didn't know where to look first.

Dad handed me a \$2 note! "Go have fun."

"Come back every ten minutes," said Mum anxiously. Dad hugged her then, and often that day. My regular check-ins told me there'd been no visitors. "Eat, in case it gets busy later," Mum said, looking teary. I ate a little curry, then asked to go play with friends, Dad's \$2 long gone on sweet treats, yo-yo, and lucky envelopes.

Before I left, our church cantor arrived. "What is that delicious smell?" he asked.

Mum showed him the options. He returned several times, once asking for a spicier curry!

"Definitely, but it's your first time trying Indian food. . ." Mum said.

"I'll have some anyway."

Dubious friends returned with him, then brought other dubious friends.

Next meeting, my parents delivered higher profits than promised. For years we held that stall. Our profits, menu and friendships grew and grew- tripling the original promised \$200.

Decades later, I returned. My own tiny daughter clutched my hand. "Wow! Are we here yet?" Aarana asked, eyes bulging. Everywhere were bright colourful stalls: chocolate wheel of course, no lucky envelopes, rides now, and in pride of place a huge international food stall, manned by myriad people.

"Yes, we're here."

Joy and Peace

AMMATA VIRAVONG | CAMPBELLTOWN

"Mum, it doesn't matter if the flowers are wilting. There's nothing we can do about it now. It's too late."

Joy watched the old woman touching the limp chrysanthemums as if somehow her touch would bring them back to life. "But why you not order nicer one?" she asked in her broken English.

"I ordered what they had," Joy snapped back.

"In our country only poor people use this flower," the old woman continued. "I call my friend, she bring some new flowers."

"Mum you can't, it doesn't matter about the flowers."

"Dad like them," sighed the old woman, as if Dad's preference settled everything.

The quarrelling made Joy immediately think of him. She recalled his voice, booming like thunder, shattering their little home; leaving broken mugs, glasses and furniture in his wake. When the storm abated, there would always be long silences. They would wait until the silence stretched into hours before tiptoeing around with a broom clearing up the debris.

In the chapel of the funeral parlour, the sunlight was streaming in through the stained-glass windows. It lit up the framed photos and ornaments placed for good luck around the casket. The sunlight lingered on a large framed photo of a young man dressed in his military uniform, stern and unapproachable. The engraving below read *17 Jan 1940 to 3 May 2020*.

Joy looked away from the unsmiling man. Her mother stood beside her, shoulders stooped, grey hair in a low bun, wrinkly hands clenching and unclenching as if they too were unsure how to behave.

A week since he had died. A week! And her mother hadn't even cried. But nor had Joy. They had just been so busy organising and arranging details.

Now, Uncle and his wife, walked up to Joy asking: "Did he pass away peacefully in the end?"

Before she could reply, the organist started playing. This was when all the other mourners would ordinarily turn up. But today it was just the four of them with the elder presiding over the service.

In between the silence and solemn words, Joy could hear Aunty's muffled sniffing. At one point, the elder said: "He left his country to come here because of his principles and ideals."

A beam of sunlight glittered on an army medal strewn around the photo. It suddenly dawned on Joy that this time his silence would not be broken.

Now Joy wanted to know, to ask him - who are you? An idealist? A father? A soldier? A husband? A scarred man? Was it worth it in the end leaving your homeland and everything you knew behind? Did you find what you were looking for? Did you get there? Are you there now? Perhaps, you are there now. Finally at peace. Perhaps.

As the sound of the organ rang out loudly, Joy and her mother looked at each other. There were tears now in each of their eyes. Holding hands, they watched the flames around the casket dance to life.

Dunes

BELLE BUTLER | BLUE MOUNTAINS

The sand-dunes were on the move, marking the slow creep of time. Like giant slugs they swallowed up trees and shrubs, anything in their path. The massive fronts of them were right up to the edge of the road and spilling over. So we had sand-walls out our windows, and roadworks to contend with. 40 kms-an-hour delays while bulldozers made mountains of steaming earth and cleared the way for a new road that would eventually disappear just like the one before it.

Perhaps we will come back here in five years and not even remember how it had once been. The thought of it made me want to stop and stand there in front of those dunes and somehow turn them back, uncover lost worlds. Or just wait there until I was swallowed up too.

But there you were in the back seat, screaming since the traffic had slowed, unable to give me any idea of why. We'll be there soon, is all I could say, not remembering how close or how far away this place was. It had been too long.

When we finally arrived the sun was already low. I discovered you had wet yourself.

Why didn't you just tell me you needed to go, I said, trying to get you out of your sodden car seat. But not without a battle.

Noooooooooo, you screamed, I. WANT. MUMMYYYYY! Your face a mess of blotchy red.

When I pulled you out I copped an assault of knees and elbows, feet and fists, your whole tiny body unleashing itself on me. But I didn't feel any of it.

Seemed to me you just had to get it all out, because once you were done, you were done. Then you hopped down out of my arms, stripped off your wet clothes and said, come on daddy. I followed you through the paperbarks to the lake where the sun was low enough to make everything sparkle.

We stood there together at the edge of everything we had known. Your mum always liked it like this, I said, and I took out her ashes and threw them into the gold. Then you reached up and held on tight to my hand and said, bye bye mummy.

18+

Highly Commended

Schooled

ALESSANDRO BALBI | CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

Here, in his western suburbs church, he looked at the life-size crucifix dominating the altar. Light from stained-glass windows danced in a kaleidoscope of shades and colours. Gossamer-like tendrils of smoke from candles with incense-laden aromas touched the edges of his nose. The multicoloured light show carried him away. The somniferous drone of the priest; the rhythmic chanting of the choir blending with the cascade of lights; the ornate “cathedral”... floating within an hypnotic trance.

He felt himself fall into the invitation of the crucifix.

There, all around him melted into the background. He felt the thorns digging into his head. The sharp catch of each point piercing the soft flesh of his temples. A warm flow of blood trickling down his forehead, catching in his eyes. The crown clamping around his head, matting his hair and slicing, razor sharp into his brain. Pain encircled him.

He dared, through blood encrusted eyes, to stare at his outstretched hands, crudely nailed to the splintered wood. Each hammer blow ripped the soft sinews. Every move pulled at the wounds. These were hands that once healed. Hands that comforted the sick and dying. Hands that had reached out to provide comfort and strength. Now they were impaled and torn, pinned to a blood-spattered palate, unable to hold onto any hope.

His feet were motionless, a spike holding him fast. He grimaced as he lifted himself in a futile attempt to get air into his suffocating lungs. His head drooped. Despair grew. He wished for the end-hour to come. He could hear distant cries of those around him as the centurion moved among them, methodically breaking their legs. Mercy through a quicker death. He waited for his turn but, instead a spear pierced his side. After a few drops of blood... a final trickle of water.

There, a child of ten understood, giving thanks to Him who had suffered for him. He felt a peace he'd never felt before. He gave his heart to Him who commended his spirit into the hands of something far more powerful. He was distraught but hopeful, in agony but resolved and, finally, at one with himself. “It is finished!”

Here, the sharp rap against his knuckles from Sister was a rude shock reminding of where he really was. The hard wood of the kneeler dug into the softness of his knees. Sister admonished him for not reciting the prayer with the other children. Her violence told him that there could be no personal relationship. Only the rigour of a uniformed response was allowed. Innocence and wonder had no place. The right path lay in the traditions of an ordained hierarchy. He should embrace it. Salvation came through regimented, repeated regulations and rites of a Church molding him into its likeness.

Sister had taught him well... guilt for daring to feel something so instinctive, so innocent, so personal.

Schooled.

Just remember things do change and seldom do stay the same.

He lamented what he had lost there with an anguish that he would never find it here... again.

Australia. Are We Here Yet?

MOZHGAN RAFIEI | CUMBERLAND

Two weeks before coming to Australia, my family and I went to Tehran, capital of Iran. We stayed in my mother's friend's house.

It was a January winter in Iran. I remember the night the moon stood staring at me from the window of the room where I slept and the sky shone dark purple at night. When I woke up in the morning I saw that winter had embraced the morning and the snow was laughing and dancing in a beautiful friendship. It was very cold outside, but I felt warm inside. Hope for a bright future in Australia flowed like blood in my veins, causing my frozen body to feel warm. The ground was covered with a white carpet, and snow and wind played hand in hand in front of my eyes.

After ten years of waiting and being apart, I could finally achieve my dream of seeing my father.

Time passed slowly. I remember the night we were supposed to leave Iran. I was not calm. I was like a bird, as if trapped in a cage looking for a way out.

At 4 o'clock in the morning we had to leave for Oman. We packed our things and set off. The street was deserted. I was staring out of the car window. The driver was talking, telling us we should be careful and we have to wear a face mask because of a disease that was transmitted through breathing. It was very dangerous and had the ability to kill humans, he said.

It was my first time travelling by airplane and I was full of joy. It was very exciting to see people from different countries at the airport. I had a strange feeling as well. I felt pain in my heart, the pain seeing my friends knowing it was for the last time. I was going to a far away country, across the globe.

Sitting on the airplane seat, eating food inside this huge bird and looking at the city sleeping was the most amazing experience in all of my life. I closed my eyes to feel the atmosphere of the airplane and slept.

Four or five hours later we arrived in Muscat, the capital of Oman. We didn't have time to wait, we had to go to another plane bound for Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. We had ten hours transit. In the middle of the day we got hungry and bought some sandwiches. They weren't delicious. All of them were just a memory that I had to write and record in my brain and when I needed to remember it I could open the diary book of my brain and enjoy them.

I came to Australia on Valentine's Day, 2020. I feel I belong here, and Australia is my home. I was born in another country but I never felt that that was my country. Someone greeted me: “Welcome to your home.”

Now I feel I am here, and I am at home.

Are We Here Yet?

RUTH BARRON | FAIRFIELD

Does your memory ever wander and stroll back to the past
And do you ever ponder on how things never last
Like the never ending changes from fields to city life
And the rising population with its problems and its strife

Where are all the dirt roads, that once lead to the town
Now there's tar and cement that covers all the ground
The neighbours were so friendly then, as we strolled to do to our shopping
On a dirt field road, with our heavy load, we didn't mind stopping

Skyscrapers now do line the sky, as far as you can view
While the little shops that once were there, have made way for the new
No telephone boxes along the streets, where we used to make a call
But mobiles in our pockets convenient and small

We then could even visit friends without any hesitation
But now we need to let them know by text or invitation
We used to do our exercise, with a brisk walk or a swim
But now we pay to exercise in the suburbs in the gym

Gone now are the milk bars, where we'd have a shake or two
Strawberry, chocolate, banana, or any flavour that you choose
In the inexpensive movies, which was also such a treat
As the ushers shone their torches, as we struggled to our seats

Farewell to the old Red Rattlers, vinyl seats so cold and hard
Now comfort for the passengers and steady for the guard
In the Oriental restaurants, that seldom once were seen
Now fill our streets all over, with a beautiful cuisine

There are various types of food outlets, that offer you a meal
And there's no need to leave your home to make your tasty deal
You can then just dial a number and you will quickly see
Your food will turn up, nice and hot, at your doorstep it will be

Now it's a multicultural living with a multicultural sway
A mixture of society in an interesting sort of way
Cultural food and cultural clothes of colourful displays
In the multicultural suburbs in these modern type of days

So you might live in the suburbs, with all the changes there
And then maybe more progress, but no need for despair
Just remember things do change and sell them to stay the same
Have no regret: "ARE WE HERE YET?" is the question that remains



The Safehouse

LIBBY HYETT | HAWKESBURY

Psychosis sucks.

When it's developing, there's a crossover stage where you feel like you're playing along; pretending just in case it happens to be real after all. Then you're here. You stop feeling incredulous, like, "I can't believe I have the honour of sacrificing myself for the good of humanity," becomes "I didn't want to die like this."

"Are we here yet? That'll do."

Then the ambulance takes you inside.

Bright lights and beeping, piercing, drugs. Sweet nurses. Cruel nurses. Calm monotonous voices escalating terror. "No, I wish you hadn't removed your canula. Yes we'll have to." Pulse racing over a hundred. Is this a safehouse? Who holds the safehouse?

"Do you want a cup of tea? Do you want a cup

of Tea Tea Tea?"

When you're in the psych ward it doesn't really matter what you do. What will they do about it, lock you up? So it's a free-for-all. You're allowed to hate. You're not allowed to scream, oddly. Sexual activity between patients is a major no-no. You'd think psych staff would have more street sense; after all, caged animals build tension fast.

I guess they'll keep me here until I'm capable of returning to civilisation. You get released when you can say the right things at the right time. And, obviously, when you're sedated enough to recover from the waking nightmare of persecutory paranoid grandiose delusions.

Yes, I'm very good at art, thanks. Yes, I'm good at music. Very talented. Thanks. No, I have trouble keeping a job. I'm just self-employed, although I have problems with customer relations.

Poverty is bad. It puts you in the kind of situations where your new housemates will spike your cup of tea with drugs like DMT.

When I reported the crime of drug assault, Windsor Police refused to take my statement. They said it would be my word against four, because there was no physical evidence, because the drugs had left my system while I was hospitalised. And now that I think about it, they were right. The justice system is for removing people from society who've done something dangerous. It doesn't level up survivors.

I suppose my art and music and writing have gotten better since the drug assault. My imagination has always been brilliant; and now my mind is capable of being asleep while my body is awake.

I recover. I take my prescribed drugs to prevent psychotic episodes recurring. Drug users caused my schizophrenia, by spiking my food and drink with their drugs. Being autistic, with no prior experience with illicit drugs, I didn't understand the warning signs. I don't think they meant harm. It just worked out that way. And I doubt they'll do it again, because my screaming scared them into calling the ambulance before abandoning me.

I come to the safehouse in my subconsciousness. I'm here now, but I'm safe, because I'm in reality. I can freely dream while I'm awake, with music, writing and art. I return home safely.

18+

Highly Commended

One Day

SAMARA LO | THE HILLS

The smell of sizzling ginger and shallots wafts through the kitchen.

Grandma handles the wok like a master chef, dishing out gleaming mud crabs atop handmade noodles. Uncle Jim slices roast duck he bought from Eastwood, while Aunt Su deveins prawns from the seafood shop in Castle Hill. "They're always fresh," she says.

The family's all here except the birthday celebrant.

"Where's Grandpa?" I ask.

"Leave him be," Aunt Su shoos me away. "He's had a bad day."

It's strange to hear. Grandpa never has a bad day. He's always happy, always smiling.

"Did she really say that?" Aunt Su asks Grandma when she thinks I'm not listening.

"Yes, told us to go back where we came from."

"Ignorant. Don't they know where they came from? They should go back to their own bloody country."

"Hush." Grandma glances over.

I pretend to be on my phone but my heart twists. I'm struck with the shame that hit the first time a stranger spat such venom at me. I'd been six. Then of my high school teacher telling me we read from left to right in this country.

I find Grandpa in his study, flipping through a scrapbook with wrinkled clippings so yellow they practically crackle in complaint.

Grandpa smiles the warm smile that makes me feel safe whenever I'm reminded the world isn't.

"Look." He points to an official document with a photo of great-great-grandma on it. She's wearing a cheongsam and no smile. "This exemption letter allowed her to travel in and out of the country without taking the exam."

He's talking about the White Australia policy and the impossible test designed to keep people like us out.

Grandpa points to more photos. Generations worth of our Australian story told in black and white, sepia and colour.

Behind the smiles is the story they don't tell. The one like Grandpa's - Australian born, practicing as a doctor, yet having people refuse his expertise because of the shape of his eyes and the colour of his skin.

Yet Grandpa doesn't mention it. Instead, he recalls when Kellyville was mostly farms and apples were a dollar for as many you could stuff in a bag. How Parramatta once had trams, and roads went muddy in the rain.

"One day things will change." He's said that for as long as I remember.

When the headlines screamed "Turn back the boats!", when the Cronulla riots happened, when the Prime Minister apologised to the Stolen Generation and Black Lives Matter marches filled the streets.

To-and-fro, back and forth, the tug-o-war seems endless. It's hard to believe we'll ever get there. Grandpa pats me on the shoulder. "Let's celebrate."

Outside, more visitors have arrived. Sue and Brett, Priya and Vin, Rosa and Jorge - my grandparents' friends. They've brought lamb chops, samosas, vindaloo and roscón.

"Happy birthday!"

Grandpa smiles. In it shines hope for more of this. For unity. For change. For the one day where instead of, "Go back where you came from," strangers bid, "G'day."

Lemons and things

KAVITHA VARGESE | LIVERPOOL

I saw the lemons first, ripe juicy lemons discarded on the ground. We had come to our friend James's house for lunch. Priya pointed out this old house and lemon tree saying her mouth watered thinking of the pickles and squashes her mum made. We noticed a house for sale among a row of newly built houses opposite and a small park next to it. It was love at first sight.

Once we moved to our new house, I noticed an old man always standing in front of the house with the lemon tree. He always had a smile but never spoke to anyone. The artist in Priya found his smile fascinating as she said it reached his eyes.

Today is Diwali. Nothing like a festival to bring back memories of loved ones back home. Video-called family, house is decorated, and we are all dressed up, but there is this feeling that something is missing. Priya wanted to gift a box of sweets to the old man. I don't know where she gets these ideas from.

A few weeks after Diwali, our doorbell rang. The old man was holding my son and both of them had bruises. Priya took Aiden in, and I walked him home. There I met his son who had come for a visit. I learned that the old man's name is Tao. I saw a picture of Tao, his wife, and infant son, and they looked so full of life! Tao migrated to Australia with his wife and son in his mid-thirties. He ran a successful flooring installation business. He was the hands-on person and his wife took care of all paperwork and communication. She was his pillar of strength. When she passed away he didn't want to move away from her memories. I remembered my parents and my eyes welled up with tears.

I came back home and checked our CCTV footage. Our front door was accidentally left open. Aiden got out of the house and started walking to the road. Uncle Tao saw a car coming fast, and he ran to pull Aiden back. They both fell down. I can't even imagine what could have happened if Uncle Tao wasn't there! I should go and thank Uncle Tao properly.

Last year passed in the blink of an eye and next Diwali is here. Aiden is Uncle Tao's self-appointed English tutor. Priya has become an avid gardener under Uncle Tao's guidance. Looks like a new gardening club has started in our street and Uncle Tao is the president. James and I are going to pick up the food for our Diwali street party. I saw uncle Tao and another neighbour talking and walking past. From the back Uncle Tao reminds me of my favourite uncle from childhood. Our street seems to be buzzing now with activity. I wonder where were all these people before!

As I was rushing a fleeting thought came to my mind: "A society where ethnic groups interact freely without letting go of their roots. Are we here yet?"

Flashbacks

JASMINE BAKER | PARRAMATTA

She lays awake at night staring at the ceiling. Door closed. With no lock and key. The only lights that peek through her bedroom window are the brightly coloured orange and yellow streetlights. The brightly coloured lights are vertically aligned, aligned because of her vertical blinds hitting the exposed bricks. She often sobs alone in the silence of her room, alone where no one can hear the droplets of tears running down her fair skin complexion with warm undertones. "Silence is good," her inner voice says, "no harmful thoughts can hurt me now." "It's just you and me now, alone," she says softly to herself and gently rocking herself with the pretend lullaby playing in her mind.

Her bed perfectly aligned, aligned close to the exposed brick walls she immediately fell in love with when she first moved in. Lying flat on her back imagining her mattress is her yoga mat with her legs separated apart and arms relaxed to the side, and eyes closed. Her body is relaxed with the awareness of her chest and abdomen rising and falling with each breath she takes. This, this is her coping mechanism but she knows deep down inside it doesn't help, help those racing thoughts inside. She awakens, awakens herself from her meditative state. She remains in the same position, but with her left arm arises with her palm reaching to touch the cold and newly painted white walls. "It's been two years, two years living here and you would think I would have moved on by now. The familiar becomes the unfamiliar. The inspiration becomes the uninspired. The motivation becomes unmotivated. You try to move on with life as though nothing had happened. As though the nightmares, and everything else that had happened didn't happen?"

She begins, begins to feel the disconnection between her heart, her body, and her mind. Her heart racing, racing to reach the final finish line before one takes their final and last breath. Her body frozen, frozen cold with nowhere else to go. A normal human being's reaction of deeply distressing experiences one might go through. Her mind is complex, complex at times of exposure to multiple events that are often invasive, often retold and often witnessed over and over again but are far too often untold. Her mind, her body, and her heart share the only connection when reliving those memories that don't seem to go away. She thought after two years, she will return to normal life but is still haunted by nightmares and unable to shake the images of past events and lingered scents that trigger her mind, even while awake. Her struggling feelings of anxiety, angrier, and confusion about how to make sense of what has happened to her. She is told that all of these symptoms are common, common with a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a.k.a PTSD.



Living Stories Winners



Are We Here Yet?

CLAUDIA WONG | CUMBERLAND

"Are we here yet?" I ask my friend Isabelle. We've both been trying to look for a book that leads us back home, but we can't seem to find it. It's impossible to find!

"I think I have the book here, jump in!" Isabelle yells. I jump into a light cobalt sky from an old, rickety house along, with many bountiful books. As usual, we fall on a rough surface of books and struggle to stand up. A neon blue sky and lush emerald green grass surrounds me. I try my best to guess what book we're in until... Bang! Two clumsy kids crash into us and splash us with water from their bucket.

"Okay, nevermind, we're not home," Isabelle reassures me. I decide to grab a random book and attempt to get home.

"Come! Try this book!" I call out to Isabelle.

We both jump into a forest of moss coloured trees and an onyx coloured pathway. It's obvious we're in "Little Red Riding Hood", but we're not home.

I start to daydream and not take notice of Isabelle's mumbling. I turn to see Isabelle curled up in a ball, sobbing slowly. "Isabelle, what's wrong? Did you get stung by a bee?" I question Isabelle in the most friendly manner possible.

Isabelle's crimson red face and eyes as puffy and clouds stands out from her jet black as she starts to speak. "W-we've looked through h-hundreds of b-books but we c-can't find the r-right one. H-how long a-are we going t-to s-stay here f-for?" Isabelle stutters.

"Don't worry! I'm sure we'll find our way back home, we're like peas in a pod! You're the adroit pea, and I'm the enthusiastic pea!" I explain.

Isabelle wipes her tears away and starts brainstorming a way to get home. After a lot of useless ideas, Isabelle finally figures out a strategy. "Maybe we need to look for a book that looks like home!"

Immediately, Isabelle and I dig through the mountain of books looking for a book that looks like home.

"I found something! It's a picture of a cracked, scarlet background! Like Australia!"

As we jump in the book, we both fall as heavy as a whale onto the surface of a desert.

"No! I thought we were going to be at home!" I yell gloomily.

In the corner of my eye, Isabelle is frantically looking through the mountain of "Isabelle?" I ask. No answer. Well, not until she finds a large picture book with two beds on the cover.

"I found the book! Jump in!" Isabelle exclaims.

I take her hand and we both jump into the book. Poof! I slam my entire body on my bed, trying to recover from the heavy fall.

Quickly, I find my phone and call Isabelle. "Isabelle?"

"Shh, everyone's still asleep. Make sure you don't tell anyone what we did, okay?" Isabelle confirms.

I nod my head and calmly fall asleep...

Living Stories WINNER 10-12yrs

Judges' comments

'A wonderfully creative and imaginative concept displaying a confident command of language and style; an engaging piece with a vivacious quality and rapid-paced development of storyline.'

10-12

Winners

The Girl On The Front Porch

AMY JIA | PARRAMATTA

There is a girl on the front porch of the house next door,
With nothing to do but to pick at the floor.
Everyday I pass on by,
I hear her saying she wishes to fly.
Fly, fly, away from this land,
Far from the issues at hand.
Sometimes when the sun shines,
She'll sing songs of all kinds.
Her voice is pure, coated with honey,
So when she sings, she looks all sunny.
What she sings is sour, painful and dead,
It hurts so much, it just gets into my head.

Every night, I walk by her house,
And there she's sitting, small as a mouse.
She's sitting and staring, still as can be,
Tears sparkling down her eyes, blue as the sea.
There's pain so obvious, shining in her eyes,
Not everyone sees it whenever she cries.
I hear her whisper sadly and silently,
"Help me, help me" while shivering violently.
She'll curl into a ball, small like some peas,
And stare to the sky, and waving trees.
Her voice cracking, she'll sing a song,
Always so short, never goes long.

Then in the morning, light burns her so cruel,
She'll smile and watch, her eyes like two jewels.
Behind the bushes I'll silently wait,
As her fear, and her pain rapidly escalates.

Living Stories HIGHLY COMMENDED 10-12yrs

Judges' comments

'Original and powerful with a strong command of poetic form; a distinctive voice that articulates universal themes with ambition and confidence.'

A hand reaches out from inside her door,
She sinks, and sinks, deep into the floor.
Falling, until she can't anymore,
The hand grabs, then pulls her into the house.
And I wait, and wait, for her to return,
But she doesn't, till night, soon I learn.

'Who is she?' I question,
Interest soon became obsession.
She's a viewer of wars,
Do-er of chores.
Victim of many,
Plaything of any.
She's suffered for her entire existence,
And from others, she's kept a great distance.
Does anyone care, what is becoming of her?
Her entire existence is becoming a blur.

Everyday, I've been watching her carefully,
She's been breaking down terribly.
Things change along with time,
Each day she's covered with more and more grime.
Scars also layer up on her face,
Her dress is now blackened, but once was white lace.
Her humming has diminished, about to stop,
Thinking she's a complete flop.
Now she mutters like tiny drizzles of rain,
"Gotta go insane to stay sane."
One thing hasn't changed at all about her,
It's her song, to which she always refers.

It goes:
"Imagine a world where everyone's free,
And imagine a bird, so wild and carefree.
Imagine a sea that flows for acres,
And imagine a place, full of peacemakers.
Now look down on me, in the darkness,
And tell me why, I seem so heartless.
So let me go, go, far into the wild,
Please know, know, I'm just a mere child.
Is there someone out there who'll hold me real tight?
Is there someone out there who'll watch me at night?
Someone, someone, please just come and save me,
I'll be waiting here, waiting here, until I'm set free..."

Are We Here Yet?

ALEENA STENY | BLACKTOWN

My name is Dolores Porti. I live in a time in humanity where walking outside without an oxygen mask seems like a distant fantasy. A usual morning can be applying thick layers of sunscreen every day and ensuring my oxygen tank is full. It's hard to believe that at one point, we didn't have to do this.

My grandmother's stories of her childhood fill me with great wonder. In her stories, there was pristine water and pure oxygen. Best of all, the world was overflowing with vivid colours. The trees would dance in the wind, while the sun would illuminate the lakes. The sky was dreamy, and time seemed to stop. Everyone was free and full of life. She told me it is because of humans I cannot live in that world.

"You see, humans were careless, Dolores," she would tell me, "They polluted the precious Earth as if it was nothing, leaving behind rubbish and all sorts of contaminants. Slowly but surely, our water was full of toxic chemicals. The beautiful greenery began withering away.

"Then the Ozone crumbled, allowing fatal UV rays to strike the Earth," she would say in dismay. "Because of this, the Antarctic began melting away, leaving many animals to be left dead. Later, the toxic smoke from factories filled up most of the atmosphere. Countless numbers of precious trees died," she used to say pitifully.

I know that this is true. In fact, it caused so many extinctions, to the point where trees can now only be viewed by attending an exhibition.

"But Grandmother, couldn't they have kept some of the forests safe?" I would inquire. "Surely they thought about the consequences."

"They decided to clear out those forests for urban development, dear. We were in desperate need of more land. Naturally, the lack of trees made a significant decrease in oxygen. Because of this, the government proposed the idea of buying oxygen kits. None of us really liked the idea, but we had no choice. It was our only hope."

Grandmother's stories felt like a hopeless fairy-tale, but I couldn't help but wish that our world too, could strive with such life. What would of it have been like? You might begin to worry and think, "Are we here yet, are our lives already beginning to falter?"

Currently, perhaps not. But soon it may be. But don't you worry! There is always time to take a U-turn and change this!

"Dolores come downstairs! I need to refill your tank before school begins." That would be my mother. Anyways, remember what I have said.

The future is not inevitable. You can change this.

Are We There Yet?

ISABELLA BRIDGES | BLUE MOUNTAINS

I watch as the roads suddenly disappear into mist and my curiosity grows. I look around in the confined space and start to worry, my brother's anger starts to rise as I envision him thinking about when to start complaining. This is going to be a long ride I think, but little do I know it is just getting started.

"Are we there yet?" my brother complains. I groan at the sound of this and start to twist and turn but the ringing in my ears doesn't stop.

"I'm hungry, do we have any food?" my brother continues, thinking about what to say next. "Are we there ye-" BLUEH, a gush of Weet-Bix and milk flies down Anton's shirt and pants, the car jolting in the middle of the road and swivelling to the side. I moan as my parents usher me to the front seat so they can clean up, knowing that now he will get all the attention.

"Do we have any vomit bags in this car?" my mum asks, gagging.

"No, we don't," Dad replies, "you weren't expecting anything different, were you? It has always been the same old answer."

"Ok, well, I am not cleaning that up!" Mum says adamantly. My dad groans and looks for a wipe then starts to pick up the vomit. His face looks as if he has just swallowed a cockroach, spewed it up then ate the spew. He looks disgusted!

"You owe me one," he mumbles under his breath. "Are you feeling okay Anton?" Dad asks in a normal pitch.

"Yeah, I think it was just a one off thing, we can get back on the road now!" he replies.

"Wow! Anton wanting to go on a long drive, this must be a miracle!" I mumble jokingly.

"Shush! Look out Bella's window and you'll see Bankwest Stadium!" my dad says excitedly.

"No way!" my brother squeals. He loves soccer. I look out of my window, watching the humongous stadium of black and red slowly fade away. I'm about to watch it disappear into mist as all of the other scenery has when BANG, the car suddenly stops!

"What this time?" I ask curiously, already dreading the untold news.

"Flat tyre," mum explains.

"Ugh, this trip has already had one catastrophe, we don't need a second!" I moan.

"Don't worry, I always bring a second tyre on road trips," my dad says reassuringly. He steps out of the car to the sounds of beeping horns.

"I am always prepared," he says, taking a new tyre from the boot and replacing the flat one.

"Now, let's get back to driving," I grumble drowsily. And after all the little and big mishaps and fixes, all of the what's happened now, I'm hungry and are we there yet, the car comes to yet another halt.

"Oh no! What's happened now?" I ask.

"Are we there yet?" my brother moans.

"Nothing's happened," my dad announces. "We're here!"

Fire and Smoke

EMILY TAYLOR | CAMDEN

I awoke to the annoying continuous beeping of Mum's phone. I thought that it may have been my Mum's new dating app. She broke up with Dad a few months ago. I struggled to get out of bed now, the thought of life changing so rapidly, new beginnings. This was not what I ever wanted. I felt so many feelings, I wished to feel like me again, would it ever be?

Today I felt choked and suffocated, more so than usual, and my Ventolin was needed again. As I was making my bed I noticed that the sky was unusually orange. "That can't be good," I thought to myself. I walked out to Mum and could see she was more than worried. I asked her what was wrong. I assumed that she was continually upset about her and Dad.

She said, "The news informed everyone to download an app and when I did it said that there was a close fire a suburb away." I asked how it happened and she said that someone deliberately lit the fire. I said, "Why would someone put people in danger like this?" She didn't answer.

I asked her what should we do. She said that we needed to pack everything that was important to us and leave. So I packed my phone, teddy, some clothes and my favourite picture – it was of Mum, Dad and me.

Panicked, we dashed to the car holding our breath. The smoke was so thick you could taste it. Red lights flashing, sirens blaring, uniform to help surrounded us. I believe that every home is worth protecting.

In the car Mum told me that the only person she could get a hold of that was away from all the fire and smoke was Dad. I was thrilled! I hadn't seen that in so long! Was it okay to think, I can't wait to have some fun together!?

We drove through three hours of devastation – are we here yet? So much bushland burnt, wildlife destroyed, more families damaged, not just mine – pure fear!

Dad's hug never felt so good. It was about 9.30 at night when I said good night to my two favourites. I went upstairs and realised I'd forgotten my cup of water. I went back down the stairs and heard Mum and Dad say that they were sorry, and that they wanted to make up. I was so ecstatic I couldn't possibly sleep!

The next morning rolled in slowly, and Mum and Dad called me into their room. I thought that they were sharing the news I prayed for every single day for the past 83. But it was so very different. She said that the firefighters couldn't save our house, and we had lost everything. Or had we?

My heart sank. We sobbed together as a family and embrace each other. This was one of the best and worst days of my life but our new brighter beginning together!

Are We Here Yet?

SABRINA MEMON | CAMPBELLTOWN

What has humanity not suffered?
There's racism, inequality, and where has this led?
Is this what we wanted to have discovered?
So, I ask myself, are we here yet?

Have we conquered all the struggles,
Or have they just begun?
Are we still caught up in our biased troubles?
How do we get this all undone?

Women got their rights later,
While men had received them earlier.
Some people were told to be greater,
And that's when things started to get dirtier.

Some people were wealthier than others,
While some had no fortune to spend.
People became greedy leaving their brothers and mothers
And others started to befriend.

Life began to be a destitution
There were numerous protests occurring
People had trouble figuring out a solution
Because difficulties kept on recurring.
Pandemics broke out leaving millions to suffer,
Friends became enemies, no longer working together,
People didn't get tougher, but they seemed to get rougher,
Countless had lost jobs and were left on the streets, leading to beggars.

Some prayed while others backbite
Haven't people learned their lessons?
People got separated while problems got tight,
This led to further depressions.

People have travelled through many conditions,
Conditions which we will never forget,
Still people fight for their positions,

So, I ask myself again, are we here yet?

New House New Country. New World

RIGEL PEARCE PULIDO | CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

In the city of Chile in Mexico, two girls, Lili and Lulu, each two years of age, were abandoned in a small orphanage.

Although during three years many people had wanted to take one or the other of them, they refused to leave without each other.

The girls grew to the age of five before a traveller family arrived at the orphanage. The family wanted two children which could have an adventurous life. The orphanage immediately introduced the family to the inseparable children.

The family took them together, but what Lili and Lulu didn't know was that from the little orphanage they lived in there was the huge world to explore.

In 2015 Lili and Lulu exited the orphanage with their new parents, Karon and Jhon Munimaque. They entered a taxi, which drove them to Karon and Jhon's house, a large building with many different apartments.

They entered one of the small apartments. Their room wasn't bigger than the one back at the orphanage, but you could say it was cosier.

At first the girls were quiet as they were used to, but in a week's time they acted like regular children.

In February the girls were given some bags. Lili got a shiny pink bag and Lulu got a blue one. The girls quickly finished packing the few things they had. Lili packed a teddy bear and a white blanket with flowers that she used in the orphanage. Lulu packed a fluffy bunny and a light blue blanket.

Once packed, their parent took them to the most amazing spots in Chile. They were astonished at how awesome their home country was. They went to the mountains, El Valle de la Luna, Easter Island, Santiago. They went all around Chile. Every night the girls lay outside the tent and looked at the beautiful night sky. It was the same sky they looked at in the orphanage.

Home Was Always There

DAISY SPIES | HAWKESBURY

In the kitchen was a bed and on the bed was a teapot. The old teapot was cracked all over, it had been soaked through and dried out. The house had obviously once been beautiful, tall veranda posts with intricate designs, exquisite cut glass windows and gorgeous wood panelling. The house was in a deserted old village, a village full of other houses just like it. The houses were abandoned, perfectly preserved since the day everyone had rushed out.

In the streets of Green Hills, footsteps echoed for the first time in years.

"Look at this mess, Hewan," Gregory scoffed.

"Yeah, I can't believe those people were devastated to lose their homes, they're so ugly."

"Never mind, we'll knock em down in no time. The owners will probably hand the land over in a heartbeat," Hewan replied.

"You betya we will, Hewie. We'll clear the land and put in double the number of houses." The two men left in a Tesla.

Only minutes later an old ute pulled in and out got a mum and her teenage daughter. They walked into the house awfully slowly, observing everything from the peeling paint to the mouldy doors.

"Matilda, it's my teenage room." There were marks on the walls where band posters had once hung, a school bag with exercise books, the ink long gone.

"What did Grandma do when the floods came?" Matilda asked her mum.

"I remember the day we left. We had no time at all. The flood waters were rising so fast all Grandma did was grab the photos and shove us in the car. We drove to the RSL and then a few days later we moved into the government funded house. None of our stuff survived. I think Grandma came back years ago but found it too confronting." Kate looked wistfully around the bedroom.

"When do you and the towns people sign the contract, Mum? Matilda asked.

"Tomorrow, honey," Kate sighed.

"Is selling the land the only thing we can do, Mum? What if we keep it?" Matilda said imploringly.

"No, actually I hadn't thought of that honey, but we really should go, you have netball tonight," Kate responded dismissively.

Kate had wanted to see her childhood home one last time before they sold to the developers but now that Matilda had seen it she thought that the story shouldn't end there.

On the way to the agent's the next day Matilda tried to make her mum see her side.

"Hey, we could renovate the houses and make Green Hills come alive again, Mum."

"But I would have to convince the whole town Matilda," Kate objected.

"I'm sure they have emotional connections to their childhood homes, and besides everyone has government grants, this could be great, Mum!" Matilda enthused.

"Okay, fine, I'll make some calls."

The return to Green Hills began, a journey that would take a long time.

Kate and Matilda had been searching for the feeling of home and now they were finally here.



Petrol Emergency!

DHYEY PATEL | THE HILLS

Dad, are we there yet?
What is taking so long?
Why aren't we moving?
Has anything gone wrong?

I'm carsick, I'm nauseous!
My butt is all wet!
I'm dizzy. I'm tired
My tummy's upset.

Mum, break the window
I'm sweating like mad!
I'm thirsty. I'm ravenous
My head's aching bad.

My seat belt is too tight
Watch out, there's a cop!
I'm starting to belch
We need a mop!

People are honking
They're starting to pass
I think you forgot, Dad
to fill up the gas!



Road Trip

ELIZA HAYES | PENRITH

Bags packed, ready to go.
Car starts up nice and slow,

Squeezed all together in the back,
I unpack my car bag sack.

Reading for a while, the car is silent,
Not a single thing is crazy or violent.

Are we here yet?

Lunchtime, drive-thru! How lucky
Hopefully the car doesn't get sticky and mucky.

Eye spy. Such a fun game,
No one in my family thinks this is lame.

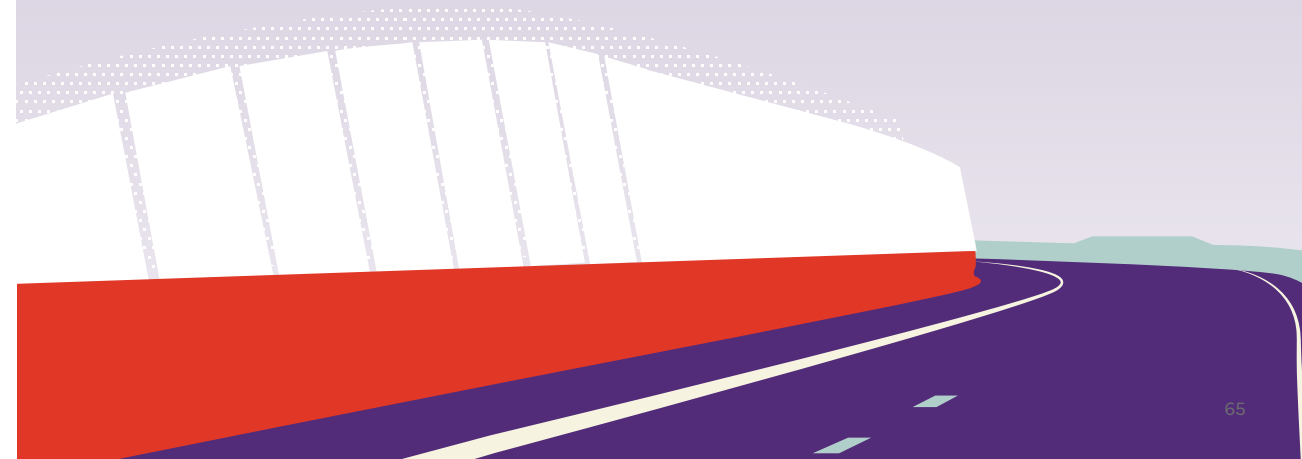
The game gets harder, we play very competitive
Our rounds are fast and consecutive

Are we here yet?

Bored and tired, only 10 more minutes.
Arriving at our destination, my biggest hope,

We drive down just one last slope.

Are we here yet?



13-15

Winners

An Ode to My Brown Body

SOFIA SAEED | BLACKTOWN

Are we here yet? Yes, we are. However, the true question stands; are we seen, here.

My bones are the Himalayas.
Running through my spinal cord to my tailbone is a rigid range.
My flesh is the Thar Desert
Delicately veiling my skeleton from any intruders strange
My blood is the Indus River
Replenishing and revitalising me from any change

Do you see me now?

I am every immigrant's dream.
I am the priceless wedding gold they unwillingly sold
I am the rosy breath they heaved their prayer with
Trying to regurgitate lines like a wordsmith

Can you hear me now?

I am the word terrorist, paki, curry muncher; shoved, choked and smothered down with the hand
of assimilation
That was their ramification to say THAT THEY MADE IT TO THE NATION

Can you hear me now? My Ammi's outstretched palms offered me the crumbs of my culture on a bent
silver spoon.
But I refused.
I bleached my culture, dubbed my own language ugly, only to look as pale as the moon
But these palms didn't sway in the breeze with these coconut leaves
Nothing but a hollow husk left trying to whistle the tune of the thieves.

Can you feel me now?

For years I have begged for a little visibility, a little peek of this confusing kaleidoscope I call mine.
Something more than the common snickering remark of
"Hey curry chick, your face is such a punchline."
But you see my life is a rotten grapevine trying to bear wine that tastes like poisonous turpentine
I'll never be enough... I will always fall short

My brown will never look as good on me as it looks on the white girls behind the small screen.
MY mountain. MY desert. MY river.
Take the mehndi from my callous hands, take the maang tikka from the thicket of my hair. Take
me and make it yours with extra sheen.
Do you wear me now?

From being split between two worlds; living in Australia is like I've been fighting for independence
for the second time.
A partition from my conscious to my soul.
All the way down to my last bit of self-control.
But today's a new day; beautiful and sunny
An ode to my brown body every bit fair and lovely.

Living Stories WINNER 13-15yrs

Judges' comments

' Thrilling and defiant this work is beautifully crafted and balanced. It explores universal
themes with depth and control delivering a message of hope and self-determination. '

Saved By Western Sydney

BRONTE PAGANO | PENRITH

1956, SEVEN DAY WAR. GRANDMOTHER.

We had never heard bombs or shots before; we huddled closely under the table. Hours passed.
Finally, I snuck out the front door, to horrors unimaginable! Bodies littered the street. My younger
sister followed, and then ran back inside. When my parents walked outside they took me back
inside, then began packing what we could fit into a trunk. We put on as many valuable things as
possible, my mother's bangles jingling all the way up my arm. Six pounds slid into my fathers
pocket, and then we were walking.

The army loaded us into a WWII bomber, and we were off. We were leaving everything behind. All
my friends, our house and our dog. I didn't know it then, but I would never set foot in Port Said,
Egypt, again. Never see the country I lived in for my whole life, all eleven years of it My every breath
had been of this country's air, but no more.

A few months later we moved into our new home. We had been luckier than most. It was so very
difficult in Sydney; I had been moved down from 1st Form in high school to 4th Year in primary
school. And all because I couldn't speak English. I was very smart, but just couldn't read or write
English.

It was also very difficult for my father. They did not accept his degrees or qualifications, so he was
forced to return to university. But both he and my mother could speak English, so that was not a
problem for them. Western Sydney gave us so much when we needed an escape from Egypt and
the ghastly scenes there.

1952, ITALY. GRANDFATHER.

Our big family left Italy to make a better life. The world war left us with poverty. We left with nothing
but the cash in our pockets. We landed in Sydney, and I began work in a factory. I was only eleven
and didn't speak English at all. It was hard, but it was the only way to begin in Australia - what I now
call home - many many years in the future from that time.

2021. TOGETHER.

My grandparents met each other a few years later. As a young couple they moved to Blacktown,
to establish themselves with many other young people. It was affordable and a good place to live.
They have lived in Western Sydney since they came from overseas. Now another two generations
of their family also live in Western Sydney. Their legacy is us. As a community or people, all our
parents, grandparents and great grandparents have led us, as a whole and as individuals, to this
point. Where we live as a community. Generations of people have proudly made their lives, their
families and their homes in Western Sydney.

So, are we here yet? All of us, we are here together in our collective experience being Australian
but unique in our identities at the same time.

Yes, we are here.

Or a human that doesn't fit in just like mine with invisible pain.

Living Stories HIGHLY COMMENDED 13-15yrs

Judges' comments

' Employs a juxtaposition of storylines to weave the intergenerational narratives of survival and
building hope for the future. The simply cast language is very effective in narrating a story of family
trauma and determination to overcome obstacles; authentic and grounded in its exposition. '

13-15

Winners

Battle

CHALISSA POLIGADOO | CAMPBELLTOWN

Tough as a lion
Rough as a bull
You just do as I tell you to
Then thunder won't rise, and rain won't pour
You aren't good enough
You aren't pretty enough
You aren't skilled enough
So just sit alone in the corner
Once you rise, I'll drop you low
I'm the predator, you're the prey
Follow my rules, as there are consequences
So, for now, be silent like a mouse
Once you snitch, you'll never be seen
As the wind grabs you, there's no more
So, hush and listen
So, shhh or be imprisoned
Surrounded in fear and anxiety
Not much to do, but to play with their rules
Thunder screaming at my face
And the wind that's chasing me like a race
In the dark corner getting told what to do
Screaming and yelling
My ears popping out
And eyes flooding with tears
I'm unknown and lost
I'm unknown and invisible
Betrayed, broken, bent
My misery, falling in deep slavery
The ground pulled me
Ouch, wiping the red gushing blood from my face
I've been hit and been told to sit
It all restarts again
Depressed and silent
We've become strangers
Did I do wrong
Or did I not
That ruined face
Big, black, blue bruises
My broken heart
All torn in pieces
I spread my wings ready to fly, make it upend
No more battle, bring me peace
Time ticked fast, it's the end
I've made it



Are We Here Yet?

FATIMA IBRAHIM | CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

Alarms blared, faint mutters and shouts all over the place, terrified looks masked the faces of those once calm. It looked like nobody knew what was going on, but I knew one thing – those sirens give killer headaches. Streets were packed waiting to see why the president had turned on the emergency sirens. I squished through the small gaps people had left to make it to the front but froze just before I reached the platform.

A glass ball like the ones the adults use for the lottery – now, what would the president want to do with that?

“As you heard, citizens of Arila, the stakes of war have been increasing between our neighbouring countries Telisis and Ladonia, and now we are no longer safe.” He stopped to let the people mutter in disbelief.

War? I’d never thought I’d see an actual war before, not that I could imagine a woman fighting in a war, far less a sixteen-year-old. But that didn’t explain the glass ball...

The place went dead silent as the president went to take a paper, but instead, he got two.

“I’m going to call out two names written in the papers. Those who are called are going to be Arila’s spies. First, Cozibi Wraith.”

A boy who looked around seventeen with devilish black hair walked up to the platform.

“Now for the second name: Cami Levake.”

That’s when the silence was broken with the fast beating of my heart.

I can’t remember going up to the platform, but there I was standing next to that boy who stood almost a foot taller than me.

“That’s all for now,” the president announced as he grabbed the wrists of mine and the Cozibi guy, taking us behind stage. We stared at him in confusion while he stood there with a watch the size of his palm. “This is OPA. She’ll be your GPS and radio system to the others we have undercover in the specified locations. “Just say ‘Are we there yet?’ and she’ll give you the direction for the next few miles.”

I heard a mutter like “pfft who’d name a device?” but I was pretty sure that was the boy I was teamed with.

“President when will we be starting the mission?” I questioned.

Wraith raised an eye, smirking. God, I sounded like I wanted to do this.

“You will be starting now. Go pack your things immediately.”

I blew my chestnut hair out of my face seeing Cozibi approach me. “Ight pretty girl we’re going, now you have the watch thing.”

I scowled in return but showed him OPA in my palm. “OPA are we there yet?” I declared, voice uneven.

“Turn and walk left for the next 4 miles,” a robotic voice answered. The journey was repetitive, walking left to right till we were at the border of Ladonia. That’s where everything went wrong. I woke up as pain shot through my stomach, warmth surrounding my body.

“I’ll be on Ladonia’s side always,” said the guy, once my partner, now a traitor.

Are We Here Yet?

LAUREN PHAM | FAIRFIELD

The serenity of such an atmosphere continued to play a soft melody, soothing the two into an unworldly state of consciousness. The vast endless ocean of harmonious oranges, reds and pinks swirled together to unveil new land. Giant mythical jellyfish-like creatures roamed the waters, providing a safe haven, protecting and watching over anyone who enters the vortex of serenity. Upon discovering a new world no has yet to tell the story of, a sharp exhilarating thunder sounded within the two best friends being curiously led by the question: Has the future been reached yet?

An underlying world shielding the two. From what?

Inspecting the world the two could not help but compare it to their own ‘reality’ or ‘perception’ of what they lived through prior. Envious beatings bursted; why couldn’t Earth be like this? How is this so peaceful? I wonder if I can live here forever? The isolation from others except themselves created happiness, netting themselves to their own world. An endless room, where you cannot escape, a box enclosing victims into a loop of idyllic dreams only, an illusion where nothing is malicious.

Stuck within a simulation, with only yourself...

Resting in an infinite bubble of a concoction of tranquil elixir, the silence was deafening, a sharp humming sound only ever could pierce the two. Time in the kaleidoscope tunnel-like world, was no longer a pressure society has ingrained into humans and the two exploited it. A haven, pillowing both naive people, there was ever so much in an enclosure.

A contaminated vessel pulsed under the water, a deathly red bright as the sun, veined across the entire world, possessing the horizon, and illuminating the world into a hellish atmosphere. A clear trigger for the deformation and radiation-like transformations onto the wandering beasts, limbs and heads protruded from the bodies, a human-like texture dissipating the safe feeling of soft protective tentacles they once had. The two travellers could only turn a blind eye, refusing to leave their delusion of home. A repetition of an old forgotten world.

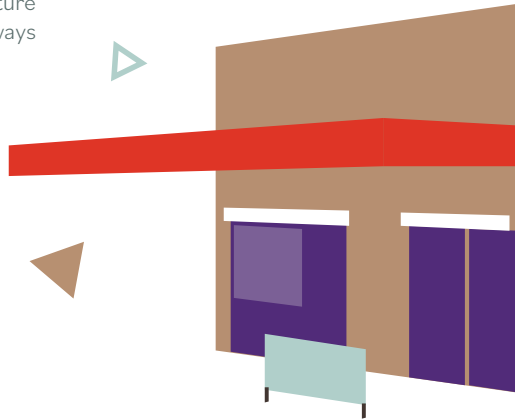
An allusion of a once luscious land replaces their vision and all of the ugly changes are still unknown, sleeping peacefully without any disruptions and concerns to anyone else. Watching over the outsiders the creature mutates into mixtures of unknown human remains, we are always afraid of things that resemble us humans.

How can we live in a world other than this?

A hazed blur covers my sight, as I distance and detach myself from reality, merely peering over the high and euphoric rush of my companion, does he realise I’m here anymore? Why didn’t I leave this place earlier? Why is this happening?

Nothing can be down, never has such an idyllic utopia resembling humanity’s greatest fears and feeding us satisfaction of isolation trapped us into a queue for death. Realising the future is a complete catastrophe, accepting we haven’t reached such a world of such wonder or danger yet.

Embracing the warm liquid around me into my body, lonely...



The Star Kite

CHERISA ZHANG | LIVERPOOL

Ten years ago, I stood atop a small hill, and saw a star. It was so big, so bright... and it looked like a kite.

I reached out to it... but it was gone.

The grass cushions my bare feet as I climb the small hill. The breeze, soft and welcoming, beckons me to follow it.

I close my eyes and lift my face to the sky. A breath of wind over my face invites me to open my eyes. I stare in astonishment at the stars dotted across the sky.

I lay down on the grass, stars watching over me. My vision begins to blur, and all I can see is a few specks of light before total blackness.

My eyes flutter open. A million – no, a trillion stars are hanging over my head. Somehow, they feel so much closer. It's as if they're speaking to me.

The air feels different. It's crystal clear, completely still, and there is no wind at all.

I realise I'm sitting on perfectly smooth black stone.

The black stone continues for as far as I can see, flat all around. Just like the night sky, it never seems to end. I spin around desperately, but all I see is black on black, and the stars are now nothing more than dots crammed into the sky.

And just when I have decided that all hope is gone, in the corner of my eye, I catch a flash of light.

I turn and run towards it. I slip on the stone, landing heavily on my front, and it moves further away from me. Panicked and bruised, I force myself up and continue running, ignoring the pain all over my body.

I reach out my hand while still running... and I make a wild grab for it, my eyes shut tight.

I open my eyes. In front of me is a girl my age, with luminous golden hair and a pure white dress. She stands on what appears to be the night sky. But as she turns towards me, she sends water rippling from her feet, distorting the perfect image of stars in the night sky. I recoil slightly as I realise her eyes are pitch black and emotionless, like a void.

The girl is holding a thin glowing string. My eyes trace the string to a brilliant golden kite floating amongst the dotted sky.

It's my star.

Instinctively, I take a step in the pool. Ripples of water rush across the reflections of stars. I stand before the girl, and she smiles at me. Her smile, although flawless on first impression... is chillingly empty. She holds out the golden string to me.

Tentatively, I grasp onto it.

The girl's dress ruffles behind her. It begins to fade, leaving behind remnants of glowing dust. Like a disease, the rest of her body disappears. Her glittery dust floats upward... until it's out of sight.

I turn to the stars, now my only company, and fly my kite.



Invisible Pain

ANNIE ZIYI KONG | PARRAMATTA

I'm a 14-year-old girl, nearly 15, lying down in bed

People will have definitely said, "She is only an ordinary girl"

Normal girls get upset easily which is thought by many

A gender stereotype that may be false like plenty

However, as time goes, it suddenly dawns on me and everything seems true

It is no longer something new to me

Here in my heart lies a mark I made

When I was low, I cut it with a blade

Scars course through my blood making a flood that goes to every segment of my body

Then trapped in a cell, like a murderer in a prison as well

My skin rips apart and I start to say

What did I ever do to cause this much pain?

I just came to Australia ten years ago

And even now, though my English is fluent, I'm still left out

I then see it, my face nearly matching my mother's

Chinese girls like me aren't really welcome so they say "Shoo! Go!"

Needles cut through me but people see no blood

All they see is an unwelcome Chinese girl.

This invisible pain... caused by acid rain running through my veins

But people can't see these scars on my arms, legs and chest.

People swear that scars get better in some time

But what they always seem to forget

Is that after each day comes the night when demons come to conquer the land

Which is why at night I wake up with fright without any command

Seeing the deep scars left on my limb

Makes me realise that I was in a region with no rest

In an area where the pain is always lurking around

Because it has always been here as a guest

Darkness takes over my soul, consuming it hour by hour

On the inside but not outside where I seem ok

I just act along with everyone else

Like there is nothing wrong with me

I play my part in the scenes of my life

While this crushing darkness overwhelms me, stabbing me with a knife

Slowly breaking my fragile heart

Into pieces that no one can recover even with art

There are positive things in the darkness though

Having these scars helps me know and see

That I survived so much trauma and now I am free

So I give my little request for others to stand up and fight

To show all these demons that what they're doing is not right

There will always those who despise you

But where there is darkness at night,

There will be light

Some are kind with generous hearts

I have met some as I go walking

Every problem has a silver lining.

Next time I see someone walk by

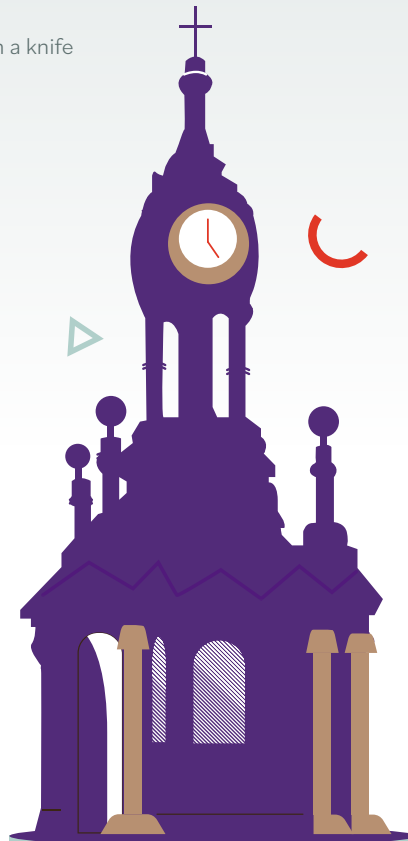
Whether it is a girl or boy or any man or woman of any race

They would play and laugh and sing some songs

But that is only the outside where there are no wrongs

On the inside may be a huge shadow hidden in the lane

Or a human that doesn't fit in just like mine with invisible pain.



Reflections

MUNIRA TABASSUM AHMED | THE HILLS

(to be read in order of: left column, right column, then whole)

my mother tells me that	the future is expansive,
my time is just beginning	it is not about to run out soon.
we replanted in this country;	I grew roots in this city,
the sweet lull of new earth	embracing the warm sun as it
softens even the most worn bodies, and	reflects the truth of a thousand lives.
that is something to be reminded of.	when I return to the water,
when I return to our first home,	it rushes salt towards my tired hands;
it is older now,	rebuilding the universe in each fingertip.
three women have come and gone;	I have grown past the girls I used to be,
the current family has a daughter my age,	our eyes look the same but bear different histories.
I am a stranger in this house but	the ocean is the most forgiving beast and
I know all its secrets.	tonight, it forms the honey-laden bridge
between the gumtree in the backyard and	across the valley in which martyrs forget their men.
the tile missing from the rooftop	tells me that we have always been in search of
a place to sit when the stars mimic	greatness. one day we will reflect
the sun. bright and unfaltering.	light like the water that created us.

*soon we will be there; blossoming from shared roots.
for now, we build towards our glorious, forgiving futures*

Living Stories WINNER 16-18yrs

Judges' comments

' Beautifully constructed and paced; as it unfolds, the poem delivers a strong message of hope and regeneration in a tightly-wrought sequence of ideas and images that ultimately form a poetic triptych. '



16-18

Winners

Dinner at the Leungs

SOPHINA XU | LIVERPOOL

The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled. — Plutarch

Dinner at the Leung's was a mirage.

A desert heat-haze of bourbon breaths and candy-floss chatter that mingled with the hot air of verbosity.

It enveloped the atmosphere with rippling waves like frosted glass, until all Ann could see was the blurry uplighting of neon phones on shadowy silhouettes, with splashes of WeChat green and Facebook blue bleeding across the glassy exterior.

Yet beneath the summer heat ripple hung the ever-lingering weight of apathy. It incubated within blurry layers of somber facades and airy words. And when the heat of the day aged into cool indifference at night, Ann watched it leak from their slouches on the sofa – their weightless posture at the dining table – with the glare of the TV illuminating the shadows of their faces like a billboard.

In the grey penumbra of the dimmed lights, a kaleidoscope of colours would dance across the contours of their features. A Simpsons yellow. A Masterchef red. And the ocean hue of Channel News flickering between shots of blaring ambulances and screaming protesters and smoky haziness and blazing fires – all in tandem with the jarring placidity of the weekly reporter.

Ann had grown to appreciate the news. She had grown past the hazy morning fog of childish ignorance – letting it clear as the day aged – until the midday peak of her adolescence illuminated the world around her, and the sweltering heat of the noon's sun vaporised the saccharine miasma.

From the limelight glare of the sun's rays, she watched summer fires racing along fringes of distant eucalypt horizons, with smoky tendrils clawing down her lungs and dusty filters painting the world a blazing orange. She saw fires in Myanmar, hot and blazing and bright as the Girl on Fire – a million eyes ablaze with a single fiery glare. From the depths of the hearth and the fluorescent glow of the flashing screen, Ann watched as a small flame, built from sparks and glowing splints, grew until it became a roaring inferno across the globe – indiscernible with the polyphony of the unheard.

Once, she lit an incense stick in honour of the Leung's ancestors before dinner. The soft glow felt tame against the background of the entropic world she'd witnessed through the accusatory glare of the TV. Mellowed. Domestic. The musty scent was but a distant reminder of the choking charcoal burn of soot and dust – of the inferno that ravaged around her like a cacophony of voices, chanting, roaring, crying:

We are here. Right now. Are you listening?

And she'd say yes. She had been listening for a long time.

And when she could hold a torch with her own flame, Ann would shout back to the inferno: I am here.

Living Stories HIGHLY COMMENDED 16-18yrs

Judges' comments

'A rich story of survival and witness within family life. The writer demonstrates a strong and confident use of language; well-constructed and deftly paced.'

Harmony

GABRIELLE CANT | PENRITH

Growing and grounding:
Oppositional forces
That divide us –
Diverging the path ahead.

Growing:
The process of progress,
Of building
Thirty storey towers
And burying
The ground beneath.

The process
Of layer upon layer
Of cold concrete slab
Stretching into the gloomy skies
Distant shouts and constant cries
Of engines running low.

The process
Of asphalt roads
And winding wires
On a land of torn down ranches
Wind whipping through the branches
Of a canopy tainted grey.

The process
Of being trapped within a loop
Of construction, repair
Ignoring the present
What is already there
Waiting, instead, for later

Growing:
The process of progress
Of questioning
Are we here yet
Without knowing
Where we're going.

Growing and grounding:
Harmonious forces
That unite us –
Forging a path ahead.

Grounding:
The process of regress,
Of burning
Rigid constructions
And revealing
Their foundations.

The process
Of wondering eyes
And meandering minds
That know the story of a river
As not just water but a giver
Of life

The process
Of falling leaves
And outstretched roots
Reaching through the dampened soil
From which death itself recoils
In a canopy vibrant green.

The process
Of being free of restraint
Of construction, repair
Accepting the present
What's already there
And thinking little of what is later.

Grounding:
The process of regress
Of knowing
That we're here now
But questioning
Where we're going.

16-18

Winners

The Train

ANASTASIA REYES | BLACKTOWN

I'm on a train that hasn't stopped running for five years.

Or at least, I think that's how long time's passed since I got on. I must've been... what? Sixteen... seventeen maybe, when I boarded. There was an etching I made some time ago to track the days – tallies carved into the soft wood of the carriage door – one I'd given up after day five-hundred and sixty-two.

The carriage rocks back and forth, engine rumbling softly. The windows display stretches of green plains, dotted with the odd house here and there. As I watch, I think – not for the first time – of home. A blurry image of a purple-bricked two-story townhouse, wedged in the middle of similar-looking structures. I've forgotten what it's like to sink into a feather-soft bed at the end of a long day. At the same time, I don't miss the smog, the repetitive grey-purple buildings. Everyday was repetitive. Boring. Listless.

On top of everything was Mum. Living with her was like chewing on nails – getting an earful when I came home a little late, telling me off for leaving cups and dishes on my desk, suffocating in a tiny, cramped house, like crowded fish in a bag. It was only a matter of time until the bag would burst.

And so it did.

I left home with nothing but the clothes on my back and got on the first train I could. A reckless spur of the moment decision indulged by the glitter of adolescence, the naive desire for a spiritual awakening. Now I suppose I'm here forever. Maybe this is my punishment for being selfish, my own personal hell in this tiny, cramped carriage without any hope of escape.

Suddenly, there's a memory pulling at my brain – a younger me, barely scraping knee-high, Mum swooping me into her arms as we rode on a train not unlike this one. Her hands were full of calluses from working long nights and days, and her tight face was buried in my birds-nest hair, whispering a mantra of “chugga chugga, choo choo”. The scene is a faded sepia still in my mind, glazed in amber, and it makes something – something new – stir beneath my ribs, like a painful open sore.

I think – for the first time – of what I'd do if I ever get back, if this train ever stops. Go home. Take Mum to a nice dinner. Apologise over and over. I'd do more. Give her the life she wanted for me. Get a job too...

And then I realise that the air is still. The engine is silent. The windows are full of fog, but it's clear the train's stopped. The carriage door is open, and I can see the platform steps outside. I feel myself rise, walk, and then break into a run. I stumble outside, feeling the cold wind rush against my cheek, the sun bright and blinding in the sky.

I turn to find the train gone, as if I'd never even left.



The Stories I Missed

LEO CHAU | CUMBERLAND

As I retrace the familiar Western Sydney paths that I have taken more than a million times, I savour each step as an enriching experience that cannot be ignored, never asking “Are we here yet?”

While gazing into Afghan tailor shops lining the streets of Auburn, I smile in awe at the intricate designs and colours of beautiful Salwar Kameez displayed behind glass windows.

While watching the intense concentration of Vietnamese elders playing cò tướng amongst chattering shoppers at the busy markets of Bankstown, I gain deeper respect for their profound skill and strategies.

While walking through the groceries in Blacktown, I am enlightened by the different South Sudanese varieties of rice, grains and sauces and the flowing beats of songs performed by musicians in Nuer.

And while eating in Harris Park, warm feelings overcome me as I inhale the endearing smells of aromatic spices, from cumin, turmeric to cardamom, being cooked in flavourful South Indian curries.

At each step I take through the bustling alleyways to the crowded side-streets and distinctive boulevards, I am drawn further into wonder. Every street, person, and structure holds a myriad of unique stories to be told. Each step transports me to new places, allowing me to socialise with different cultures, some rarely given coverage by mainstream media.

Yet, despite living in Western Sydney my entire life, I hadn’t always viewed it with the same admiration and pride as I have now. In my younger years, I was constantly asking “Are we here yet?”, treating every begrudging step as only a way to get from Destination A to B. Venturing through Western Sydney was a chore, every moment spent wondering when my family would stop looking for a restaurant or shopping.

These places that we frequented which I used to hate walking through, were visited willingly by others as tourist destinations, looking to discover the sensational “Westie Culture”. Meanwhile, I failed to cherish this culture built by diverse people, celebrating their lives together as Australians. Like many local kids, I only had a lack of interest and reluctance in discovering each facet of Western Sydney, viewing it as boring and a place visited too often.

As I’ve grown older, I look back at my younger “Are we here yet?” mindset unfavourably, as do many other locals. This mindset has made me miss so many aspects of Western Sydney, which is constantly growing, evolving and changing, that I can never experience again. Now, despite the current businesses that I walk past being just as fascinating, I’m faced by the fact that I’ll never know the true character of the older yet charming establishments that predated them. The stories of possibly a restaurant opened by hard-working Samoans to perhaps a once popular kebab store that closed down.

Now as I take more steps down these familiar paths, I make sure not to ignore the places I walk past, ensuring that I never miss a single experience or story as I’ve had done so many times before.

Komorebi

ABBIE PAYNE | BLUE MOUNTAINS

Komorebi (n.)

(koh-mo-reh-bee)

The Japanese expression for the sunlight as it filters through the trees.

Dusk climbs upon his blackened throne
As dawn begs the day
Only to let her stay.
Yet her children in the stars
Whine and groan
“Are we there yet?”

Such a fleeting time is this
That one would miss it if they blink.
It is a time where sun nor moon
Make their presence known upon the sky.
Instead they dance together
Below the surface
Away from the prying or judging eye
Among the flowers of the sky.
In their absence not many wonder
To where they take this dance
But blink and you will miss it
Passing by within a trance.

Even the trees pay homage to this time
As they shed the green rust from their leaves
To reveal pure gold underneath.
Alas we are too blind to see,
We exploit the ground for this treasure

Only to feed our leisure.
For those who seek in glory and greed
This foul creature continues to breed.
If only more eyes would turn to this time
They would realise where true riches lie.

It is also at this time that under the sea
Many fishes swim merrily in search of a meal.
They are quite happy and carefree and young
And couldn't care less about the moon and the sun.
Nonetheless they continue to hearken
To bubbles and reeds and the dance of the larrikin.

“Are we there yet?”
The larrikin children groan
With their feet now weary
And their sleep fully grown.
For they have strived for an extraordinary day,
Such striving seems wise
But really its foolish.
Instead you must help them find wonder
In ordinary things
So that they may feel joy when time begins
For they are not there yet.

A Place Called Home

REMY NGUYEN | CUMBERLAND

Are we here yet?
 Are we where the feeling of safety surrounds us?
 Have we reached a place where there is no longer danger or regret?
 Have we come to a time where people don't look at each other with disgust?
 Have we arrived at a destination that accepts us for who we are?
 No we are not here yet, no we have not reached it I tell you!

Are we here yet?
 Are we where our neighbours can peacefully walk down the road
 and not get called out for their nationality or skin colour?
 Have we come to an age where we do not need to worry if
 our loved ones would be the next target of racial hate?
 Have we reached a destination where people don't think of it as "us against the other."
 Are we where rules and regulations are created for peace not to segregate?
 No, we are not there yet. No, we are not in paradise yet I tell you!

I see a place... a place where harmony radiates.
 A place where justice rolls down like water.
 A place where the sun never sets, and love dominates.
 A place where expressing yourself is not a crime.
 I see a place where all types of people come together,
 not for war but to achieve a common goal.
 A place where people do not talk about advancing nuclear weapons
 but rather about the latest sport games.
 That is the paradise I see where we have not come to yet!

I see a place... a place that seems unreal to the eyes but pleasing to the heart.
 A future that does not judge someone on the basis of their skin color but on their
 ability.
 A future where children cannot tell the difference between an Asian or white person.
 A future that is worry-free, not regretting and respectful to rights and safety.
 A future where everyday is a mystery and brings new opportunities and pathways.
 Heaven is a place not too far away.

Are we there yet you may ask?
 Have we reached this wonderful heaven that I see so vividly?
 No we are not here yet, but the delightful taste of it is close.
 We still got a long way but look how far we have come from
 the tragic past we left behind!
 Look at our teamwork, our protest, our rallies.
 Look at how strong we can be when we stand up for each other
 from the claws of racism.

At last, I hope to one day see a place where we can all be one and belong.
 Be in comfort with one another and embrace our unique differences.
 See the beauty of this broken world in a new reflection of light.
 Celebrate the unity we lost but finally found; called home.



16-18

Winners

April 24th

ALYSSA DUNN | HAWKESBURY

April 24th; the day made as a joke
Keeping us inside, scared of any ordinary bloke
Taking a stand. Having my say
Drawing attention to what has become of this day.

Overlooking everyone. Observing each face
Opening my mouth preparing to present my case

*Waking up each day with choices to make
Masks to put on, and decisions that determine our fate
Always the daunting question lurking in our minds
“Are we here yet?” Based on what we decide*

*Is society how we want it? –
Are we who we want to be?*

*Despite Western Sydney sometimes feeling shoved aside
We aren’t shielded from what lies outside*

*Riots, wars, protests, and pain;
Common to society and those who fall under its reign*

*My story is one that is untold
Not because you don’t know me; but because I choose to withhold
I’m no Moxie but still, hold my own power
Rather than waiting to be rescued from my tower*

*When I reflect on myself – I see fear
Concealed by my suit of armour rather than being clear
Fear of the unknown
Of what the future plans;*

*Are we here yet?
No – because we are divided into our clans
Categorised and ranked
Others deeming our worth and our fate*

*But what provides them their power?
Society and the media fuel their fire
Weakening us to grow its empire
Perfect is something few people truly achieve
Because the idea of being perfect is poisonous – as hard as it is to believe*

*Society drives itself to its breaking point in order to even come close to perfection at its core
When the simplest way to achieve this goal is to remove the mask and be proud of your so-called imperfection or flaw*

*Look at us
Wondering why everyone makes such a fuss
Each unique but imprisoned by a number
“The lower the better” is what we are told
When we keep score of the scales, afraid to be bold*

*Some drive themselves to their limits with no end
All to keep up with what is on trend
These trends changing like the season
With no second thought as to what was the reason?*

*We aren’t here yet
We aren’t even close*

*There are those in society who think violating us is ok
That it is to be celebrated like any other holiday
So we must take a stand against those who contemplate
The idea that assault is something to celebrate*

*Coming down from my podium and into the crowd
I was greeted by nothing, not a single sound
Observing those near me I could feel in my back
Pairs of piercing eyes that I had seemed to attract
Who knew the result of me addressing our reality
Would be met by such awe like Moses parting the red sea*

*We are not here yet and there are those who lack clarity
Who would have thought? Since I’m simply stating our reality*

Linh's Key Cutting Service

PETE SHMIGEL | PARRAMATTA

The Metro people stood apart at his shop's counter. They took turns talking so Linh had to turn back and forth.

"It's a generous deal, Mr Nguyen, and I just want you to hear it from me. We buy out your remaining lease. We give you an incentive payment to start up anywhere else you wish to," the taller boss one said.

Linh noticed the corporate embroidery of the red waratah logo on the man's NSW Government sky blue business shirt. And the way his navy blue COVID mask was chosen to match.

Linh turned away from the counter and chose a blank key to put on the cutting machine. Doing something would help him say less when he wanted to say more. He picked a green blank key and started cutting.

The Indian card reader at the end of their arcade had once told him that green drew fortune. Like the American dollars Linh'd secretly collected during the war back home.

"I'm sure, Mr Nguyen, you've talked to your daughter. She would have told you that we don't have to offer even that and can compulsorily acquire to build the Metro," the woman said.

Someone had done a good job replacing the heels on her shoes, Linh saw. Her face mask wasn't from the Chinese dollar store either.

The Metro. A Parisian name for a train to take hi-vis labourers and IT workers from the western suburbs to their jobs, Linh thought. They wanted to build their Parramatta station 25 metres below his shop.

His shop whose thousands of cut keys, repaired shoes, stitched up handbags, and engraved dog tags had paid for his family's house in Canley Vale, visits back to Saigon for his wife, and his daughter's law degree at Sydney Uni. He loved hearing his customers say: "Wow, that's great" when picking something up.

His shop where during quiet times, he'd watch Vietnamese soap operas on YouTube on his iPhone and drink sweet coffee. Where he'd think about his village and the changes that came, and the boats at the end of the war, and the Lidcombe t-shirt factory where he'd saved enough from repairing sewing machines to first set up.

His shop away. Away from his youngest son who liked to embarrass him by showing him Tinder; away from making Sydney modern; away from change.

"How about it, Mr Nguyen?" mMan asked.

"I can go talk to Tracey directly," Woman added.

Linh twisted the gauges and ground at the key. It screeched like the sulphur-crested cockatoos who ate the almonds his wife put out by the Hills Hoist in their backyard. Sparks flew.

He removed the "key". Flipping the plastic shield off his face, Link used a wire brush to smooth edges on what he'd made. He remembered Tracey's advice about what others in Parramatta were getting.

Happy with the result of his work, Linh put a tiny metallic "\$" on the counter for the Metro people to see.

"Very valuable," Linh said.

Living Stories WINNER 18+

Judges' comments

'A current, relatable and authentic tale of everyday determination and hope that weaves daily experience and memory with overarching themes of disempowerment of the individual; the hard-working Vietnamese store owner recalls events from the past and present and grants the reader insights into his life, culminating in a metaphoric David vs Goliath image of the freshly-cut key (representing his life and sacrifices) fashioned into a dollar sign and declared to be 'very valuable' to those who would destroy what he has spent years creating and building.'

Tissue Paper Heart

FINOLA METHVEN | THE HILLS

My daughter and I were born at Westmead Hospital, but it was the Children's Hospital next door that was overfamiliar – like a previous house we'd lived in that was never a home...

2017

I hesitate to admit that falling in love with my daughter was accidental. Her mouth opened as she wriggled, freewheeling in the dark. Then she was stubbornly still; her feet tucked beneath her tiny body and fingers outspread, gemmed with bright white bones.

The sonographer's reflexes locked in on the ultrasound wand. Right femur, left femur, tibia. Next her spine, crystalline. I turned to Josh: "It better not have scoliosis like its mum," I joked lamely. My husband sat beside me in his uniform of stonewashed jeans, blue eyes taking in the spectacle. Ever the observer, not prone to half-baked verbal interaction, like me.

On screen, black and white pictures of her brain – two perfect hemispheres. "You know, some babies are born with one," I whispered, then worried that such a factoid was distasteful. The sonographer repeated "lovely" as we made a mosaic of her, my 18-week passenger.

Despite the sonographer's coaxing, our baby stopped cooperating. We were asked to come back later for close-ups of the heart and feet. Have something to eat, we were advised. Go for a walk. Do some stairs to shift the baby into position.

Then the next scan, and more images, before our new specialist mentioned an anomaly. Motioned closer, I tried following the diagram sketched on yellow paper...

"Hearts can have a hole that closes up after birth." My own thrashed about wildly. Our baby's heart hole was larger and in place of the dividing walls that normally separate the heart's four chambers.

"But it won't ever have a normal heart. Like you and me." I spat out the words in protest, a bitterness congealing in my mouth.

This heart defect meant a 60 per cent risk of a chromosomal abnormality like Down's Syndrome. The specialist noted down her mobile phone number.

*

Hello. It's Mama... Are you there?

2018

We were in the Grace Centre for Newborn Intensive Care at the Children's Hospital. From my wheelchair, I lowered myself into the blue fold-out chair then stretched my arms out ready to receive my three-day-old baby.

Her silky flesh pressed warmth into me. Propped up with our pillows, my arms tingled and burned until we melted into our pose. The weight of her, reassuring.

As the clock's hands rotated, the world deadened around us.

How can I give her up for open-heart surgery tomorrow?...

*

At the time, I'd understood there would be two open heart surgeries. My daughter would face her second a few months' later. Unknown then was that an unlikely complication would lead to a third, a fourth... Three in the space of a month.

She'll need more still, when she's older.

2021

"Mama, don't ignore me. Are we here yet?"

My toddler didn't know how grateful I was that she's here, now.

Yes darling. We're here.

Living Stories HIGHLY COMMENDED 18+

Judges' comments

'Very moving first-person account of a heart-rending story of survival against the odds; well structured, emotive and engaging the reader is taken on the journey of hope and unconditional love.'

A Catalogue of Loose Change

ADAM BYATT | BLACKTOWN

He pushes the granny trolley down the street in the mid-afternoon twilight, packed with pamphlets and catalogues folded together at 5am sitting beside his dad, and stacked in the trolley before school. He's old enough to wander the neighbourhood for loose change but not yet old enough for Maccas or Woolies.

Before he left to get half the run done before soccer practice, his mum offered a cup of sweet, milky tea.

"You're an old man before your time," she said, taking in his oversized hoodie, trackies and mismatched footy socks.

He knows where the continuously-barking dogs are and the letterboxes declaring "No Junk Mail" as a hand held up against the intrusion. At each letterbox, he dips into the granny trolley for a bundle of junk mail then slips the thin parcel into the slot. His mum says they were double, even triple, the size a few years ago, and people waited on the mammoth June toy catalogues to lay-by for Christmas.

The trolley wheels click on the segments of the footpath and he counts them in his head between driveways. Each driveway unfolds before him like a different chapter of the same book, named by house number. Cars parse families as exclamation points, question marks or sudden full stops. Parenthetical asides are discussed in the fledgling hedges, sporadic roses, curated lawns and towering gum trees. Some days he imagines the junk mail as source material to write a new instalment and other days as a link to an old one.

Mrs Papadopolous on the corner once said, "I use them for my canary's cage. He sings so beautifully. Reminds me of my husband's voice, even after he is dead these many years. Both of them always something to say."

During last week's pamphlet run, Mr Jenkins was watering the riotous range of succulents along his front fence and slipped him two bucks which he spent on the after-school special at Tony's fish'n'chip shop.

The boy looks at these stories of brick, fibro, weatherboard, and concrete shielding the heart inside. Sees lives measured in years at an address, creating stories not reflected in the confetti of catalogues but held between the folds, in the ragged edges of family who share meals with laughter and tears. Each one is a story like his. Yesterday at school he traded half his peanut butter sandwich with his best friend for strips of homemade naan.

He pushes on or he'll be late for soccer practice.

Making his way home, he treads the footpath as a miniature parallel to the road. A direction towards home and a map of the future.

Turning into his street he notices the yellow bins are out for recycling. As he pushes the trolley down his driveway he recognises the elderly Chinese gentleman who sorts through the yellow bins for cans to Return and Earn. They nod at each other making loose change, and smile because they are here, and here is the only home they'll ever need.

Cold Day in Penrith

MARK O'FLYNN | BLUE MOUNTAINS

The formwork stakes stood in the drum like so many wooden legs leaning against each other. The paper wouldn't light properly against the damp. Randy, (yes Randy), splashed the petrol tin at it and - whoosh - the flames licked back along the drooling tongue of fuel. Just managed to break the stream in time and the bright fire perfumed the dawn air like a burnout. We stood around the drum warming our backs, waiting for the cement truck to arrive. Then it would be all action stations. We would pour the mud to construct the kerb-and-guttering of the carpark we were building. Actually it wasn't that cold, the bonfire was just something to do. Randy's mate, Glen, held the sledge hammer and I held the star picket to secure the last line of timbers.

Glen said, "Oh man, I'll never be able to hold the guitar tonight if I have to bash this thing again."

Randy took the sledge and I kept a lookout for the boss whose name I forget. He arrived with the cement truck a few minutes later. The fire died down. Those stakes burned nicely.

"Just think boys," he said, trowelling a finish to the slurry, "in ten years' time you'll be able to bring your wives here and tell them you helped build this. It'll be a proud moment."

None of us said anything.

"Get a job anywhere after this."

There was too much concrete. He'd over ordered. The truck wouldn't take it back. The boss directed the left-over to be poured into a makeshift path that reached only half way from the carpark to a toilet block that you wouldn't want to be found dead in.

"Concreting up the planet," said Glen, still worried about his guitar fingers. Randy had six kids although he didn't have a wife. He played bongos in a reggae band with Glen. That was their true vocation. Not building carpark for their non-existent wives to admire. Why would you want to bring them here anyway? They had a gig that night. Mist sat low over the river in the distance like a veil. Tomorrow we'd have to strip the formwork, backfill the trench with blue metal. It was a work for the dole scheme. Randy's hands were so calloused and weathered that he could rest a glowing coal in his palm and it would not burn. That's what I remember.

Opal

MICHAEL DI GUGLIELMO | CAMDEN

The latest float in the parade of quiet miseries that is my life had just come to pass, and the 796 that gets me to my job completely ignored me.

I thought about an Uber. Expensive, but efficient. Legging it to the shopping centre myself? Literally the opposite, cheap and with this pair of legs I may as well have crawled. The incessant hollering of school children, filling the air with the static of Friday afternoon excitement, kept my thoughts murky.

Wait, I thought, that's it! It 3 pm, and every commuter's worst nightmare, the post-school pick up period had just started!

Putting the aforementioned inept legs to use, I bolted up Nasbry Drive. The school was down the road and to the right. If I was lucky, the bus would be wedged between a pair of 2005 Toyota Siennas and I could give that presumably senile bus driver what for.

Sprinklers hissed their tiny streams on modest but vibrant patches of grass. Stone angels pissed in fountains without end, old couples walked their greyhounds, the world had confined itself to this single strip of pleasant, contented living and even in my rush to catch that damn bus the details of the street did not elude me.

Like a mirage in the shimmering heat however, I saw it - the 796.

"HEY!"

I banged on the bus doors. It startled the driver, who actually looked old enough to lend credence to the whole "presumably senile" thing I said earlier.

"LET ME ON THE BUS, YOU MISSED ME AT MY STOP!"

Flustered, the blithering old man opened the unfolding glass doors and I was welcomed into the bus's sterile but air-conditioned embrace.

"Opal card, mate."

"Sure."

I fumbled for my wallet.

Then I fumbled some more.

Then, very quietly, I whispered to myself "For fuck's sake."

"Can I pay with cash?"

"Tap on or hop off, mate."

Oh, he had just been dying for a fucking chance to say that, I bet.

As I hopped off the bus it found an opening in the sea of cars and drove through. It was gone, and yet here I remained.

A woman filed her kids into a black car with a hot pink Bad Bitch Mum on the back window.

Some kids rode their scooters down a footpath with an uncanny grace.

A couple strolled with a pram across the oval to a nearby park.

This sun bathed microcosm, this tiny mundane world where people had their things and were happy with them and just kept persisting, really was eternal. My own parade of quiet miseries marched right through this place, and coloured it no differently. It was a constant, immune to my perception, warts and beauty marks alike sharing no greater emphasis on account of my mood.

A soft squelch greeted me as I bitterly trudged down the foot path. Dog shit had now caked my shoe. And perhaps just to spite me, the sun's shine grew no dimmer.

Somewhere. with a Capital S

KYLIE-ANN MALLITT | CAMPBELLTOWN

An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics – Plutarch

All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others – George Orwell

She grew up in the *‘Riff. Urban Dictionary: Penrith; the town where everyone wheres (sic) one shoe.* Her parents were on Cennalink. But she wasn’t like that...please don’t be alarmed, or judge, goodness no. It was just a series of unfortunate events. She wasn’t supposed to be here. And she will not be staying. Gran paid for piano lessons. She could articulate her consonants for the right people. Her postcode would not define her. She was going Somewhere, with a capital S.

.....

Woollies Mt Druitt was just to get her through university, of course. More of an anthropological study than a job, she supposed. She was so fortunate to have made better life choices than the full-timers: mature ladies with their faces drawn and daily whinging about aching knees. Or the customers. The air of apathy set to the tune of a perfect F-natural pitch, beeping incessantly, recording every dollar spent that someone didn’t have. The impossibly tiny six-year-old girl desperately clutching a five kilogram frozen turkey under her cardigan, white knuckled and shivering, on a stealthy exit path.

“Are you going to pay for that ma’am?”

*“Oh, I didn’t know she had that. Put it back you little sh*t.”*

No, she wasn’t like them. She was going Somewhere.

.....

And Somewhere she went. Look, technically, the house (5 bed, 4 bath) was in Scrambelltown. But, with the estate on the hill and her kids in private school, she could pretend that it wasn’t. The dark people acted white on the hill, the right kind of white. Just walk quickly when you get off the train from the city, don’t look the deros in the eye. *“Ya got two dollas, luv? A durry? Where da’ya fink ya going ya f*kin dog c*nt?”* That very afternoon she set up a monthly donation to the Smith Family. \$30. It just felt like the right thing to do.

.....

They found the best oncologist that money could buy, well, among those who could tolerate consulting south of Liverpool. Very shiny shoes, designer belt. After her husband died, she knew that she was stronger than those people who fell apart for longer than was prudent. She really was. Honestly. She was just going through a difficult time. OK?! How dare that refinancing fellow in the ill-fitting suit take that condescending tone with her?

.....

Her daughter sat up front as they drove, balancing the GPS tablet on her lap. Rows of manicured hedges became unkempt yards; and then stacks of low, utilitarian, red-brick apartments. “Does our new house have a pool, Mummy? I want a pool,” her daughter pouted. *“It should be....here!”* her daughter cried, pointing to the map.

“This can’t be it...are we here yet, Mummy?”

“I’m not sure baby but, I promise, one day you’re going Somewhere.”

Are We Here Yet?

ROPAFADZO WHITNEY BAERA | CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

Staring at the pile of mail sitting at my prosaic but admirably efficient table my heart sunk a little. Taking my sausage shaped croissant I began to think once more about the question Sarah had asked us a few years back.

Days had turned into months and months into years in the blink of an eye. If someone had told me that life would fly past me like a breeze I would not have believed. But here I was with a world-weary face, wrinkled hands and the smell of death.

Not so long ago I was in my hometown Harare, the town that never sleeps, living in a dilapidated house where mice were akin to the norm. A place where one was awakened by crowing of roosters, shouting of both young and old men and women trying to make ends meet by selling broomsticks or trying to fix broken pots and a fleet of commuter omnibuses with bus conductors’ babbling followed by a few honks here and there.

My friends and I were always focused when it came to our studies. I unquestionably wanted to become a pilot. Vividly, I remember when it rained cats and dogs and I had to walk in the rain as my family did not have a car to pick me up from school. I vowed to make my life better and to ameliorate our living conditions too. That day drove me to wake up early and read using the moon as a source of light when there were power cuts which were always there.

Desperately, we scoured the internet for scholarships until we received scholarships from the University of Western Sydney. Excitedly, we packed our bags and left. Even though I was now in a new place I still worked like a dog as I studied and worked extremely hard to buy the necessities and pay bills which were now slowly catching up to me.

My dreams however pending, slowly became a reality and after six years of training I had finally received my wings and I was now able to fly into the wispy cumulus clouds. To celebrate our successes, we went out for coffee and Sarah rhetorically asked, “Are we here yet?”

I took a moment of self-reflection, looking at how great my life had turned out, I had arrived at my destination. However, I felt I was not there yet. I always believed moving to a different country, having my dream job would make me happier but I felt emptier. I tried to reminisce about my childhood but because I lived too much in the future there was nothing to help my nostalgia.



Somos Nosotros

JAMES PEARCE | CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

There is a beach. Zipolite. It is long, fine sand, and the Pacific Ocean pounds it rhythmically, booming day and night. It could be a beach in Australia.

But it's not.

Listening to the blood-pulse pounding, feeling it within me, rising to crescendos and falling away again, I could be in Australia.

But I'm not.

I am an ocean away. A world away. And although the sand and the ocean are the same, the stars are different.

Same Earth; different Heaven.

I have traveled so far, just to lie on a beach exactly like I would find in my homeland.

You were the one who had traveled, to lie on the dry sand in the Red Centre and marvel at the flood of the Milky Way.

I asked you to come, and you came.

You were there and I was there. We weren't there.

This beach - every beach - is a frontier. Not a separation of sea and land, but a unification of them. Poseidon, relentlessly stroking Gaia, joined at the beach.

You asked me to come, and I came.

I am here, and you are here. Are we here?

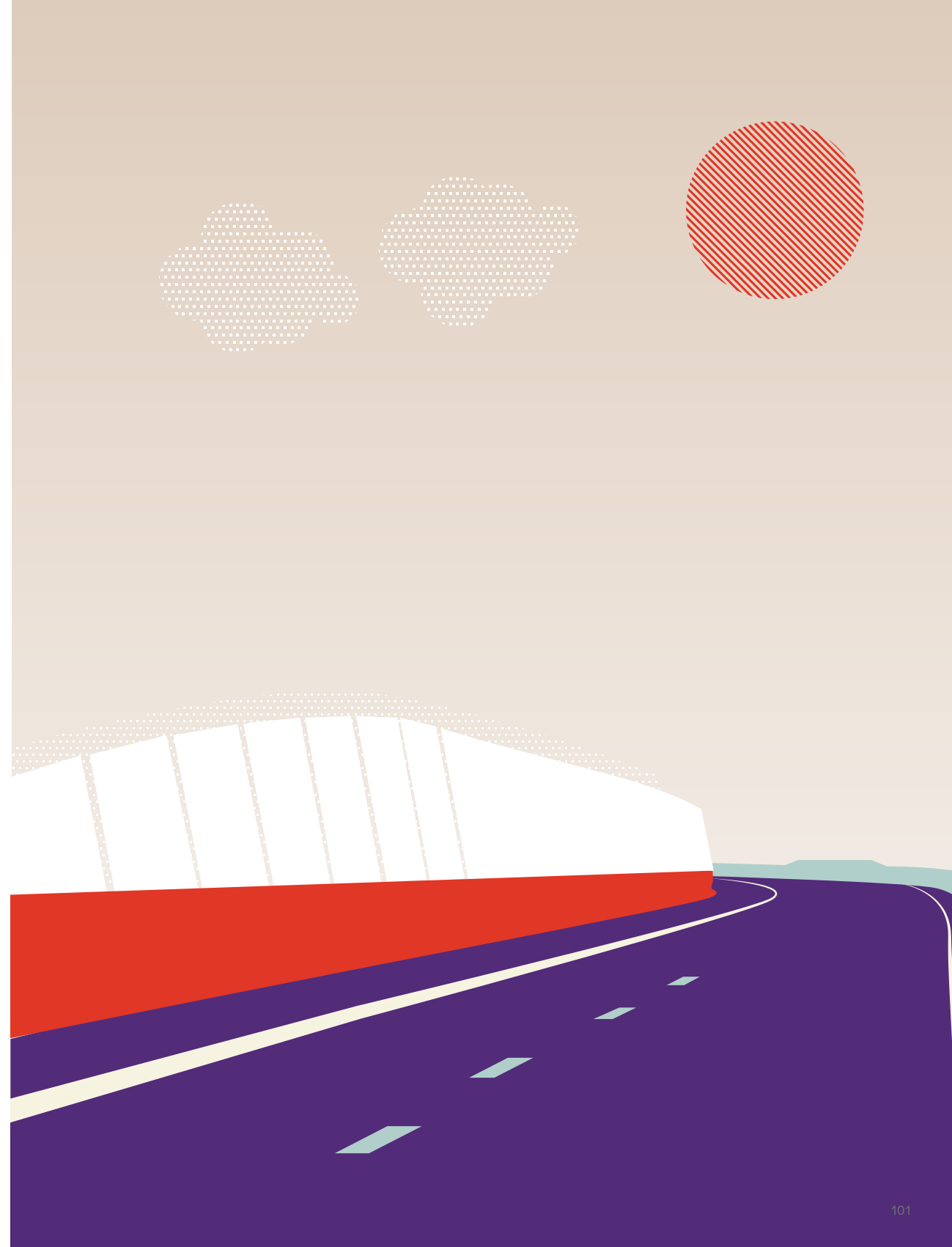
We are different, you and I. Same species, different culture. Here we are unified as one.

Are we unified as one here?

We feel the rhythmic pounding, and the ocean guides our motion. The splashing of the waves is the susurratation on our breath. The slushing of the shallowing water is the slither of our skin. The salt, our sweat.

Mexico and Australia, not so far apart, only an ocean away. The same ocean, the same blood-pulse rhythm, surging between us.

Are we here yet?



I Have Been Here

CHARNEL RIZK | CUMBERLAND

“Take your necklace off, it will beep,” my father says to me in Arabic.
I remove my necklace by which a gold cross hangs and place it on the tray in front of me.

The room is dull, the artificial lightening is gloomy.
Walking through the security scanners I hold a bag of falafel rolls, which consumes the smell of the room.

A sense of dread consumes me, I’ve been here too many times.

I follow my father through the corridor but I know this route well, I can navigate the building on my own.

I know every field and court, every hallway and corner, every restricted and non-restricted area.

For one year I have been visiting. The guards offer me their pitiful simile, I am the source of communication between them and my father.

Room 173, there he is.

My uncle, my God-father, who has lived with us my whole life. Seated on a bed, dressed in a maroon track-suit uniform.

He is now behind bars. In a place they call a “detention-centre”.

When he sees us, he smiles, always. This creates a glimpse of hope and on hope is how he survives.

At ten-years-old, I did not understand. But at ten-years-old I visited every day because where I’m from, family is important.

I wonder, reader, do you know about this centre which lies just off Villawood Road? It’s quite hidden, it’s quite evil.

In the waiting room is where I spent most of my time, doing homework, eating falafel, celebrating Easter. Visiting hours opened at 5:00pm every day and so my parents ensured every day at 4:30pm we were to arrive, because where I’m from, family is important.

But reader, life goes on. The system wins,
my uncle gets deported and I continue growing.

And if you must know, till this day,

I cannot drive on Villawood Road
Eat at Villawood McDonald’s or
Think of *Villawood*.

Don’t worry, I did not spend all of my childhood in the waiting room.

I also played with my cousins at the park. We swung on swing sets, flew on flying foxes and

Oh yes, got told to “Go back to where you came from!” by a cruel lady.

Don’t worry, we continued playing.

Reader, I could tell you about robberies and violence, racism and inequality but that is continuous and you’d keep wondering when does one arrive.

At 16 I decided I wanted to be a performer. I wanted to sing and act. But I felt stuck.

You see in Merrylands, is where I grew, in Merrylands is where I studied, in Merrylands is where I worked.

But I never knew of any artist from *Merrylands*. Do you?

Until one day I realised,
I am the artist from Merrylands.
Who has seen what I have seen? Who has felt what I have felt?

At age 21, I am here to tell you that I am here, I have always been here.

In Merrylands I still reside.

On hope is how I survive.



Stain

SAMANTHA BUN | FAIRFIELD

Even with heels on, it's still hard to see over this lectern. It seems I haven't grown since the 12th grade. I've been invited back to Bonnyrigg High as part of the alumni to deliver a speech on career paths after school. It's a challenge to unpack the whirlwind of a life I've had since leaving fifteen years ago into a five-minute presentation. I thought I'd be long gone by now, much like these starry-eyed students keen to escape the gaol green fences of this school.

In my first job as an English tutor, a Strathfield girl asked me what school I went to. When I told her, she said ew. I wore it like a stain.

Bonnyrigg High is selective now. No more metal bins the students could use as weapons. They have shiny elevators and they're building an outdoor café. My little brother does the same eight-minute walk to school, dragging his feet the same way that I did and lugging a bag full of books too big for his body. He's oblivious to the world, with a dorky grin on his face and a brain full of video games.

When I was his age, I was caught between being the bookworm and being popular. This meant hanging out with either the nerds, or the rebels who jiggled to smoke pot. One time I decided to go to KFC after school and Dad was sitting on the balcony staring me down. He said he was about to call the police. I don't blame him at a time where 5T was still prominent and Cabramatta was the drug capital of Sydney. His watchful eyes kept me away from juvenile delinquency.

The new girl Fong was a steady balance. She lived on the lone brown brick house on the way to school. On our early days off, we'd walk to her place to watch fights outside her window. The good girl in me felt complicit in the crime, but I knew warning the victim would make me the next target.

That house isn't there anymore. The servo across the school is now a Metro, but before that it was an A-Saver and before that it was a Caltex. Lots of fights happened at the Caltex, too. One year, the Bonny bad girl Quyen got hacked nine times by a machete and ended up in the ICU. She rocked the Vietnamese gangster look with her wide flared pants, cropped white shirt unbuttoned top and bottom, and straight orange bleached hair. She had soft eyes for a bad girl. Someone said her dad beat her up at home.

The last time I was on this stage, I won an all-rounder award and the boys in my grade said it was rigged because I didn't play sports. I spent my HSC feeling like an imposter. As I share my journey and all my accomplishments to these kids full of hope or despair, I feel like I've finally broken free from the shackles of this place. Bonnyrigg was never a prison; it was an opportunity to do better. It already is.



Castles

LANA IMMONEN | HAWKESBURY

The kookaburras cackle in the eucalyptus trees every afternoon, as if the setting sun is their cue for laughter. Perhaps they're sharing a good joke. The big one sits alone on the Hills Hoist, as if he's the king of his metal castle.

The family of plovers are back, too. Swooping my kids each time they get too close to their nest on the edge of the driveway. For the life of me, I've never understood why plovers lay their eggs on the ground. Always in the most awkward places. Though their babies are the cutest little fluff-balls on stick legs.

Surrounded by a cacophony of nature, this is the quietest place I've ever inhabited.

"It's such a beautiful place to raise kids," they told me. And it is. "Got lots of room to run around. Boys love to run around." And they do.

I always wanted a big family. Lots of kids. Now I never have a moment to myself. Surrounded by a horde of grubby little faces, this is the loneliest time I've ever endured.

It's an endless routine of breakfasts, lunches and dinners. And maybe dessert, if you've been good little boys. But of course, you're big boys.

Cereal for breakfast, milk, yoghurt. More milk. Fighting for the honey. Getting dressed. One whining because he can't tie his shoelace. A super-disgusting fart joke, then a real fart is their cue for laughter.

Lunch is much the same, minus the eldest who's at school.

Then comes the dinner rush. A forgotten toy is stepped on and causes much pain. Kids always leave their toys in the most awkward places.

"Eat your broccolini. Just pretend it's a green tree. Do not throw it on the ground."

Bath, shower, pyjamas and a bit of television to settle down.

My kids are in bed, but where's mummy?

I'm here alone, sitting in my recliner chair. I'm the queen of my castle.

Amongst the Stillness

TINA NYFAKOS | LIVERPOOL

Answering a question with a question is the same as not answering the question at all, that's what I learnt from Lachlan. Milena taught me that sometimes no answer was better than speaking just to hear the sound of your own voice. Silence; under-utilised and underrated. Not enough people were willing to admit that they didn't know something. Maria, the one two rows across, and a few metres down from Milena, reminded me that knowing that you didn't know and the pursuit of knowledge was as noble of a goal as one could have. Realising that not all questions had an answer, that one I figured out myself.

It was my eighteenth birthday a few weeks ago, and my yiayia gave me my papou's car as a gift. He died nine months ago, but it feels longer. Ever since then, I've found myself driving to Liverpool Cemetery and talking to those who once were living, pulsating people. Full of stories of their own, maybe not the kind you'd find in a book, but just as important because they were real. They were full of love, laughter, bad decisions, lessons learnt, and wisdom to part with.

None of them ever talked back to me, and why would they? They made it. They lived a life through to its end. The dead had no concern for the living. Mum's been on my back telling me I need to let them rest in peace. What she doesn't know is that I have something to learn from these people, the ones who came before me. The ones that walked the streets of Liverpool long before the skyscrapers and apartment buildings that sprang up overnight like weeds in cement cracks. Before Westfields and before Phoenix Plaza. That knew it with dirt roads and horses. Before it was a place people chose to come to.

I hadn't visited my papou's grave since the funeral. I needed to remember him as I knew him; quiet, stoic, but emanating with love for me like an aura I couldn't see but always felt. He was more than a name etched into Ioanninian marble to me.

Cemeteries were the resting place for the people who had reached their final exit. But every time I parked my car and walked inside the gates of Liverpool Cemetery; I couldn't help but feel like it was an entrance. That life existed amongst the stillness.

One of the first days I started going there, I stumbled across Amir. He died in 2008, the same year he was born in. Four months old. I thought about Amir the most. Every time I felt like doing something that would make me join Lachlan, Milena, and Maria, I thought of Amir and went on with my day.

North Shore If We Belong Here

AMINA JANSZ | PENRITH

We once considered our uniforms posh. Our parents had paid enough to think so. That was until we saw the boys of The King's School.

The scarlet scooby strings twisting along their shoulders shouted "boarding school" and "soldier prince" all at once. Perhaps their majestic appearance at academia's competitive da Vinci Decathlon was an opportunity to show that off to every high school in NSW. They were likely also here to win, as was every high school in NSW.

We Westies were just stoked to get out of school.

By the time the bus deposited our teams at the gates of Knox Grammar School, we had seen enough brass buttons, blazers and boater hats passing by to feel a little unremarkable. Introducing ourselves around the courtyard in velcro neck ties and unpressed skirts, we learned the true depth of "unremarkable" when some new North Shore friends heard our name.

"Penrith?"

Ouch. Sure, Penrith Anglican was a respected private college, more accurately located in the lush Orchard Hills, but everyone recognised the low status inherited by association with that place. Not so far west of Sydney as to rub shoulders with the trendy populace of the Blue Mountains. Just west enough to wind up in bogan suburbia.

Land of mullets and crime.

The pause and furrowed brow said it all. Penrith? I'm sorry to hear that.

"Okay, guys. New name," my fellow Year 10-er advised the team. "We're not 'Penrith' anymore. We're 'Orchard Hills Grammar School'."

We laughed at that.

"No, I'm serious."

Luckily, with our new nom de guerre as yet unverified, the reputation of Orchard Hills remained untarnished when we blew our cover in the competition hall.

"NO FOOD DURING THE COMPETITION, PLEASE."

The speaker didn't shout but Knox Grammar's highly effective PA system aptly conveyed the message to every single team in the hall. No one needed to hear "Penrith" to deduce which band of troglodytes was guilty as hell.

Sheepishly, the hoard of chips, lollies and cookies we had piled in the centre of our round table for sustenance slid back into our bags.

How. Embarrassing.

Back on the bus, we couldn't tell you who won that year.

We were preoccupied with greater matters.

"Which dumbass said to bring food?"

Laughing and bonding over our mutual embarrassment.

"Everyone's like 'Hi, we're [fancy suburb] Grammar School'."

Like trackwork on the western line...

"And we had to be like 'Uhh, we're from Penrith'."

...our development seemed to be in progress...

"How did we bomb every game?"

...but hilariously behind schedule.

"Should have studied or something."

"And perfected our British accents."

Our merriment halted as the bus did.

Roadworks? Nah. We hadn't reached the M4 yet.

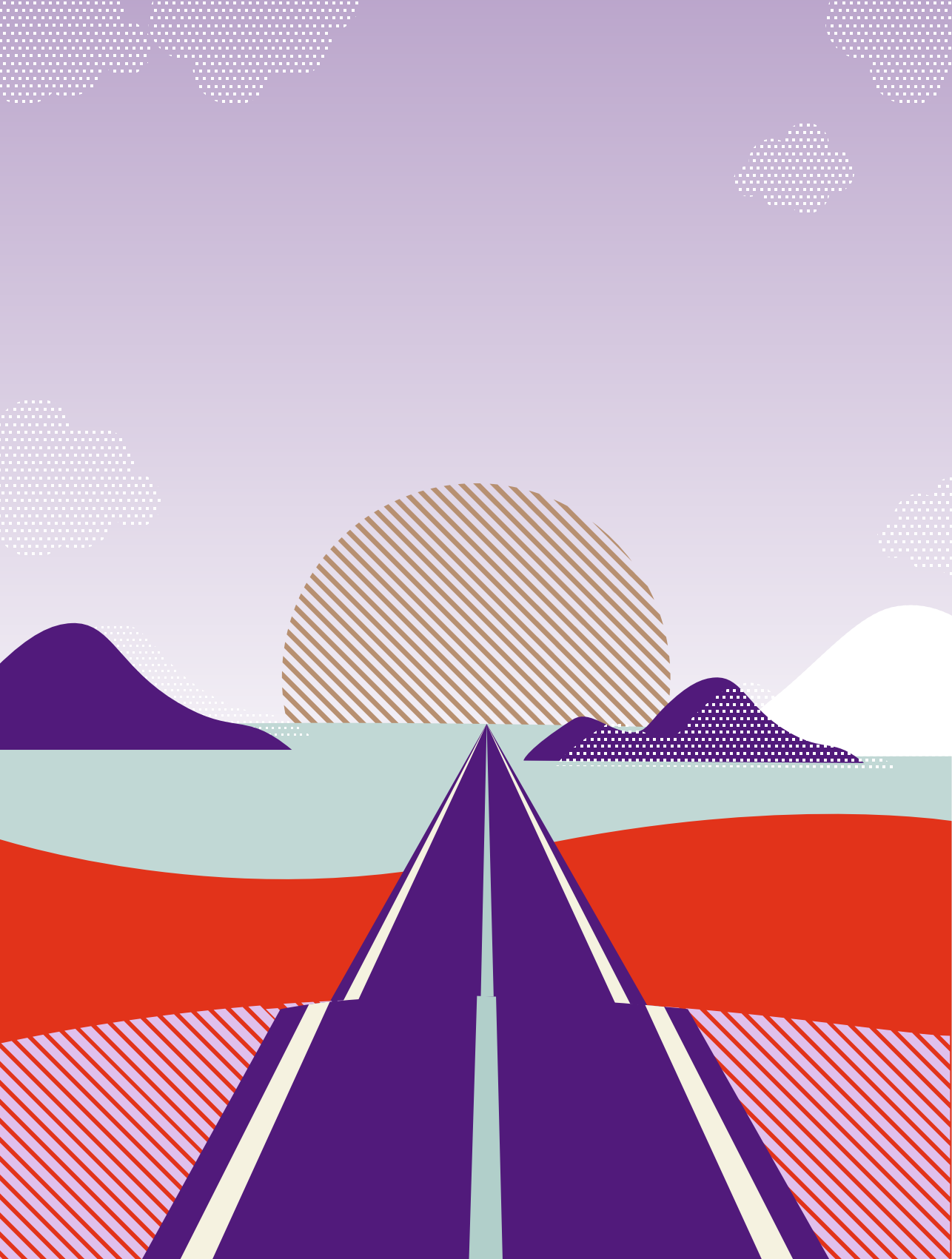
A junior Knox Grammar student prepared to cross, looking both ways like clockwork. Proceeding with Victorian poise, he politely tipped his boater to the driver.

The silence on the bus broke as we completely lost our minds.

The discipline! The elegance! Was this... etiquette?

It sounded like, "Back to Penrith with you, peasants."





*What stories there are in Western Sydney.
I know because I grew up there. What a
fabulous opportunity this is to tell the world
those stories. Get ready for shock and awe.*

Bryan Brown AM



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