



PENS *Against* **POVERTY** 

WINNING SHORT STORY ENTRIES

YEARS 3 AND 4: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Winner:

Longing for Home
Sarah Kitzing, Pymble Ladies' College

The glistening creek reflected the sunlight as fish darted through the water. Yindi plunged her hand into the icy water trying to catch the fish, but the fish were too quick. Children splashed in the water near her when Yindi heard her mum's voice calling for her: dinnertime! Yindi waded out of the water and ran towards the campfire. She could already smell the scent of yummy bush tucker and could hear grandma telling her special stories.

The crisp, sharp voice jolted Yindi back to reality "Elizabeth, daydreaming again?" the voice snapped. Yindi turned her head around, then realised Ms. Arkwright was talking to her. Yindi had almost forgotten that she had a new name, Elizabeth. "Sorry Ms. Arkwright" she said in a shaky voice, as she told herself to stop thinking of her old life and start paying attention to Ms. Arkwright's lecture on how to wash clothes properly.

Yindi had been stolen from her family. They said she would be happier here, destined to become a domestic servant for strangers in some big house – they were wrong. They had taken Yindi from her home to a school where she would learn how to cook and clean. They had taken her name from her. They had taken away almost everything.

Yindi slept in a long room with ten other children stolen from their families, just like her. Yindi only had one thing left of her old life, a necklace beaded with shells. Her mother had given it to her when she was younger. Her mother had told her that it would remind her to stay brave even in the hardest of times.

Now all Yindi had was the necklace.

As Yindi turned the necklace in her hands feeling the pretty shells, she knew that she did not belong at this school. She needed to get back to her family, where she truly belonged.

The next day Yindi escaped.

When all the children were taken outside, Yindi snuck away from the group. She rushed past the buildings to where the bush began and ran as fast as she could. Yindi didn't stop to rest that whole day or the next. She wasn't going to give up. Yindi was going to make it back home.

Somehow, Yindi managed to make it all the way back to her home country. She had no idea how she had gotten back; she had just let her instincts take hold of her. Then, Yindi smelt it. The smell of delicious bush tucker, and in the distance Grandmother's stories being told around the fire. Yindi started to smile as she raced through the bush into a familiar clearing.

Shocked faces looked at her, then her parents and sisters rushed towards her. "Yindi," her mother cried, "we thought you were gone." The air was now filled with laughter and happiness, and at the same time the sun broke through the clouds.

Yindi had finally come home.

YEARS 3 AND 4: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Highly Commended:

Stay Strong, Be Brave

Grace Butcher, Reddam House Primary School

Beep! Honk! Rusty cars and vans filled the mud covered roads. Angus and Lizzy slept like kittens. They were tired sloths after their long walk through the night to Darwin. They snorted like pigs and snored like bears. The trees waved wildly in the rapid wind. It wouldn't be comfortable, sleeping on the side of the road under a few wooden panels with nothing but a sheet to cover themselves with. Rain poured heavily and their toes were drenched. Lizzy woke up suddenly, to a large splash of mud on her pinafore. "Why can't we all be treated like normal humans, everyone deserves equal rights," Lizzy whispered to herself. Dirt flew from the ground and hit her in the face.

Annoyed, frustrated, tired, Lizzy looked up at the morning sun. Darwin was a busy place, people walking everywhere, cars beeping. It definitely wasn't the right place for two homeless children. When Angus and Lizzy were little, their parents were extremely poor. Unfortunately, they didn't survive. Lizzy turned her head around, there she saw a group of boys skipping and playing ball. Her eyes welled with tears. She gazed up at the sun like an inquisitive child listening to her teacher. She prayed that she and Angus would one day not be so poor. She knew that it may not happen but a girl can dream.

Lizzy walked up a tall hill, as tall as a skyscraper. She ran down super fast so she could get breakfast and be back before Angus woke up. She did this every morning and her usual words were, "I've already eaten." Knowing these words were lies, it made her heart ache. You see, Angus didn't know that Lizzy didn't buy the food, he was only four. As she entered the shopping center (on the other side of the hill) she saw the bread shop. It had a long line outside of it, she was an angry ogre. Every time someone left the line someone else joined it, it was like a never-ending loop of imagination.

Lizzy knew she had to stay brave in order to protect her family. Her dirty, orange hair flapped like eagles' wings in the breeze. Slowly, she bent down and crawled underneath everyone's legs. When she got to the front of the line, she sighed with relief. Suddenly, the man at the shop screamed. "You brat, what on earth are you doing down there?!" Lizzy got up feeling quite mad, but she knew she had to control herself. "Sir, I believe you get hungry sometimes," she said sternly, "But imagine you went hungry all the time, believe it or not I only have one meal a day." Unbelievably, the shopkeeper started laughing. "One meal a day, I thought you didn't eat at all, I mean look at the state of you." Feeling defeated, Lizzy slowly walked away.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I would do anything for Angus, but how can I be a great sister if I can't even feed my own brother." She thought to herself. Defeated, Lizzy walked back. The rain sounded like ripples in a stream. As she approached the wooden panels Angus woke up. Lizzy's heart was racing, she felt sick. "What if he finds out my secret, our secret," she thought to herself. Lizzy dove next to Angus and in a split second they were lying next to each other. Immediately, Angus got up. He stretched out his arms and yawned like a bear. "I know you're hiding something," he mumbled quietly. Lizzy panicked and picked up an old piece of garlic bread. It smelled like rotten cheese and when Angus bit into it, it tasted even worse.

"Let's talk," said Lizzy. Angus decided he didn't want the moldy bread, so Lizzy walked a long way in the rain to find him something else. Frightened. Alone. She returned empty handed. Her heart was ice. Her lips shook and her arms shivered. Angus questioned Lizzy. "We have a lot of money, don't we?" He asked. Lizzy wrapped her arms around Angus and told him everything. They shared some sad stories. Then the streets went silent. Angus's heart almost jumped out of his chest, he was very frightened. "I hate when it's silent," he cried. The lights on the street flickered. It was as quiet as an empty room.

Angus hugged Lizzy tight. "I feel afraid," he whispered. Lizzy was disappointed about everything that had happened that day but she still had hope. "I've been afraid this whole time, but I stayed strong and brave and that is what you've got to do now," she pointed at Angus's heart, "You are a kind, lovely boy and I know you can do it." Lizzy and Angus cuddled, they were like a mother and child. Angus twisted his short fingers through Lizzy's long orange hair. They both shared a quiet moment together. They both learnt never to give up on hope and carry on what their parents started.

YEARS 5 AND 6: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Winner:

Eye of the Storm
Neve Garden, Canberra Grammar School

It was another ordinary day. Mara's grandfather was reading her one of his favourite stories from his old, leather journal—tales of heroes and bravery. The soft rustle of the pages almost drowned out his voice. Outside, a low hum echoed in the distance, like wolves howling.

The sky had turned gloomy, a deep purple and green like an old bruise. The waves writhed like sea snakes, and the winds grew stronger, forcing the palm trees to bend and twist like sticks. Suddenly, a piercing shriek cut through the air. Mara looked out to see people running from their huts toward the hurricane shelter as the sirens began to blare. Their red lights flashed, casting a menacing glow through the storm.

Mara turned to her grandfather, fear flickering in his eyes. She rushed to his side, helping him rise. His bones creaked like the wooden floorboards beneath her feet. Though he groaned in pain, he managed to stand, his frail fingers trembling as they clutched hers. Supporting his weight, she guided him toward safety.

The moment Mara stepped outside, the storm hit her like a freight train. The roar was deafening, and she worried her grandfather might be swept away. Their peaceful home had turned into chaos. Shifting more of his weight onto herself, she pushed forward, stumbling against the wind. After what felt like days—but was only a few minutes—they reached the shelter.

Frantically, Mara helped her grandfather down the crowded stairs. The room was already suffocating, packed with villagers huddled together. She scanned the crowd for her brother, Mikey, but he was nowhere to be seen. She shouted his name over the rising murmur, but there was no answer.

Then Mara's eyes flicked to the closing metal door, and she knew. Mikey had gone after Skipper, their beloved dog. He would never leave him behind. Heart racing, Mara dashed up the stairs at the very last moment, squeezing through the crack before the gate slammed shut with a heavy, final click.

Outside again, the wind threatened to lift her off her feet. Panic gripped her until a faint whimper reached her ears. She spun toward the sound and spotted Mikey, curled tightly in a ball. She rushed to him, scooping him up while he clutched Skipper close to his chest. Bracing herself against the storm, Mara held them both as the wind screamed around them.

Minutes dragged on like hours until finally, the storm began to ease. Mara slowly opened her eyes to see the wreckage of her home scattered all around. Tears stung her eyes. They had lost everything. But Mikey was safe, and that was all that mattered.

In that moment, Mara realised that bravery wasn't about being fearless—it was about protecting the people you love, even when you're terrified yourself. The storm had taken their home, but it had also shown her what truly mattered: family, love, and the courage to hold onto both in the darkest of times.

YEARS 5 AND 6: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Highly Commended:

The Hospital Visit

Aaheli Choudhary, Canberra Grammar School

The cold tiles of the clinic cooled my splintered palm. The air smelt of lavender and tired hope, a scent they probably chose on purpose. My baby's tiny fingers curled around my sleeve; I held him closer to my chest, hiding my nerves.

The wait felt endless. I listened to snatches of conversations — people talking about jobs, hobbies, victories. It didn't steady my shaking leg. I pressed the pocket where the paper hid. The paper I promised I wouldn't speak of. The paper I swore was a nightmare. The paper that shattered my world — eviction.

When the nurse finally called us, my knees nearly gave out. She crouched to meet my tired eyes. She didn't flinch at the baby's ragged blanket or my stained uniform. Instead, she gave me a slight smile, and for a moment, the weight pressing down on me lifted slightly.

We sat on the rusty wooden bench, waiting for the doctor. I glanced at other patients — some in wheelchairs, some on crutches, others with children clinging to them too. I wondered if anyone noticed the ache behind my ribs, the constant hunger, the sleepless nights, the crushing regret of not providing for the infant in my arms. The doctor finally came, old and tired, but his eyes were kind. Still, my arms shook before entering the room. The baby wriggled in my arms, as if he felt calm, safe. The examination wasn't long, but it left me frazzled. Every beep of the monitor and shift of papers reminded me how deep the debt really was.

Outside the clinic, the streets were quiet. No children screaming, no cars honking, just simple, peaceful silence. It almost made me forget everything. Almost.

I walked past the corner store. I decided to buy formula with the few coins I had, despite the embarrassment. I stepped under the fluorescent lights, grabbing the baby formula the moment I saw it.

At the counter, the cashier looked at me with a tired smile. She didn't say anything when I handed her the coins, just let the metal touch her fingers. Then, from a small jar near the register, a coin rolled forward, as if too small to matter, yet enormous in my hands. I looked up, and she nodded. No words. No judgement. Just a human who understood.

I carried the formula home; it was heavier than it should've been. The baby played gently with my hair, twisting each strand as if it mattered, softly humming like a lullaby.

At our little apartment, I set the formula down and sat on the floor with the baby in my lap. The eviction notice stared at me from the wall, the weight of debt on my chest. But I held him close, took a shaky breath, and decided: I would keep going. I would stay brave. Not because the world made it easy, but because someone needed me to.

YEARS 7 AND 8: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Winner:

Untitled

Florence Willoughby, Woodcroft College

The days feel like they stretch out forever. Every single moment feels like years, almost an eternity. I find it hard to believe that today is the 17th of September 2025, and the day before my 18th birthday. It's hard to think about celebrating such a huge milestone when we are hiding in a bunker. I have spent the past 967 days in these bunkers in Ukraine, and I don't know if I will ever really get to experience the feeling of the sun on my face or the feeling of a fresh breeze on a warm summer's day, and that's what I'm going to fight for tomorrow.

Living in the bunkers is filled with tears and sad memories, no one likes talking about their life or what they have lost, and I understand why, but I believe if we all confided in each other, then we would be a lot more relaxed and less on edge. Everything outside seems so far away now, like a dream that I just can't reach. The only things I know are the constant sounds of explosions, booms in the distance, and the rumbles that shake the ground beneath us. It's frightening, and it becomes harder and harder to stay brave.

In the dark corners, I see children huddled up, crying; it breaks my heart knowing that this is their daily life. What breaks my heart more is hearing all the words and stories the adults seem too quick to tell the children to get them to sleep. I don't think the adults even believe themselves.

Will this war ever end? Those are the words that ring in my ears every hour of every day. It has always felt like an unanswered prayer. Some days, I feel a bit of hope flickering like a candle in the wind, while other days I find it hard not to cry and remain strong for the children. It's both exciting and terrifying. I know it means I'll be stepping into a world filled with danger, but deep down, I also feel a strong sense of duty.

I want to fight for freedom, not just for myself, but for my family, my friends, and all the children who deserve to grow up without fear. I want to protect the dreams of the young ones who should be playing outside, riding bikes, going to school, and living without worry. They didn't ask for this war. Nobody did. I can't imagine a childhood filled with hiding and fear instead of laughter and play.

For now, I wear my determination like armour. I am ready to face whatever lies ahead, driven by the hope and love I have for my country and my people. Together, we will stand tall and fight back. Together, we will work toward a future where children can once again chase butterflies in the sun and laugh freely without fear. Tomorrow marks the beginning of my journey into that dream, a dream worth fighting for.

YEARS 7 AND 8: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Highly Commended:

Untitled
Nabhya Gautam, Oakhill College

The full moon hung gloomily over the forest village of Ryzen Bark. The wolves would be on the prowl tonight, Eli thought, but not just any wolves. Impostors. Backstabbers. Werewolves.

The marks in the sheep pen had been found as the sun bled from gold to red. Too large to be human. Too precise to be a wolf. That left only one possibility.

Now, on the eve of the Banishment—the one night in two millennia when all creatures possessed by the Charred Spirit would be cast from this world—the werewolves had chosen to strike. Panic swept the villagers. The Banishment would begin in twenty minutes. The guards, the only ones capable of fending off the wolves, were on the far side of the village. The ceremony would be defenseless.

Then they turned to Eli.

He was perfect. Fast. Small. He knew every alley and rooftop like the back of his hand. Just one problem: he was terrified.

His nerves froze the moment the villagers' eyes fell on him. He prayed for a miracle, something to turn the ashen sky blue again. But none came. His gut twisted with dread as his mind wavered between stepping up or staying safe.

He stepped forward.

Then another.

Then a run.

Before he knew it, Eli was tearing past the chapel, the market, his sister's school, his feet pounding the dirt, until he reached the last wheat crop before the guards' hut. Just him, the field, and the wolves.

The crop seemed larger than ever. In daylight, he'd complained how small it was. Now, it felt half the size of a planet.

The stalks hissed in the moonlight. Red eyes flashed. Eli froze. His legs shook, his breath caught. For a heartbeat, fear nearly consumed him.

Then the chapel bell tolled. He thought of the villagers waiting, of his sister's pale face. If he stopped, they would all lose.

So he ran.

Stalks whipped his arms, wheat and claws swiped at his heels, breath hot at his back. Still, he didn't stop. Step after step, even with his heart about to burst, he forced himself forward.

He broke free of the crop, the guards' torches blazing like the call of safety. "WEREWOLVES!" he shouted, " OVER HERE! " his voice cracking but carrying through the night.

Steel gongs rang as the guards rushed past him. Eli collapsed, lungs burning, body shaking. He was still terrified, but he had done it. The werewolves were sedated, then put to sleep. Until the Charred Spirit left their soul. Because of him. Everyone could sleep tonight, because of him.

Bravery, he realized, wasn't the tough guy everyone thinks it is. It's the little things, the pebble that chose to make a big ripple.

YEARS 9 AND 10: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Winner:

The Weight of Shadows
Taranpreet Grover, Trinity College

The rain fell like a relentless curse, drenching the streets of Eldridge Hollow in a grey gloom. The air was thick with dampness and decay, wrapping the dilapidated buildings in despair. In one such crumbling tenement lived thirteen-year-old Lena, her spirit flickering like a dying candle in an unforgiving world.

Lena's life was a series of trials filled with hunger and sleepless nights. Her mother's health had worsened since her father left, taking with him their fragile stability. The absence left a gaping hole, constantly reminding Lena of how easily life could crumble. Each day felt like an endless fight against despair, the burden of poverty weighing heavily on her shoulders.

At school, the worn-out buildings mirrored the haunted expressions of her peers. They shared whispers of dreams that felt as distant as the stars, their laughter brittle over the cracks in their realities. Lena sat in the back of the classroom, feeling invisible, her heartbeat echoing in her ears as she fought to stay strong against her own struggles.

Then came the announcement of a food drive, intended to help families in need. As the school bell rang, Lena's heart sank watching classmates depart with bags filled with food, their laughter ringing hollow against the encroaching darkness. At home, the shelves were bare, shadows standing in for actual food, while desperation clawed at her mind.

The next morning, dawn barely broke through the steel-grey clouds, yet Lena stood outside the grocery store, hands trembling around a crumpled note that read, "Please help." Ink smudged by tears, she wrestled with her flickering hope, unsure how long it could last.

Time stretched like a nightmare as people passed by – some offering sympathetic glances, while others ignored her completely. Just as despair threatened to consume her, an older woman approached with a warm, kind smile. "Dear, what do you need?"

Lena spoke softly, explaining her situation. The woman reached into her bag, pulling out a can of beans and a loaf of bread, pressing them into Lena's hands. It was a small gesture, yet monumental – a lifeline thrown into her darkness.

As grateful tears fell, Lena realised that bravery could be born from vulnerability. That evening, she returned home with not just food, but a renewed sense of purpose. Inspired, she began collecting food donations from her neighbourhood, rallying other families to join her cause.

While the shadow of poverty still loomed large, Lena discovered that resilience emerged from the collective courage of many. In their unity, they became a powerful movement against despair, forging a community from the darkness that sought to consume them.

In the heart of Eldridge Hollow, under skies that rarely lightened, Lena found her strength. The shadows still whispered, but they no longer defined her. By fighting for herself and others, she uncovered a fierce light of hope that flickered defiantly bright against the oppressive dark.

YEARS 9 AND 10: SHORT STORY WINNERS

Highly Commended:

Untitled
Zoe Percival, St John's College

I plant my feet together at the edge of the mat, my shoulders pressed back, lifting both arms so my fingers are straight, palms angled. I give them a small nod before stepping towards the middle of the mat to begin my floor routine. Mid routine, I try and do a double twist, but as I land, a sharp pain shoots through my ankle. I grit my teeth and stumble, and I know that I have lost points, and on top of that, I have done something; something bad, but I keep going, forcing myself to. Each flip feels heavier all up until I finish my final pose, breathing ragged, I turn toward the judges, wincing, and lift both arms palms forward, fingers straight. The gesture shakes, my arms trembling, but it's enough. I let them fall, taking a careful step back as applause crashes around me as I walk over to the bench, wrapping an ice pack around my ankle. Next is bars, one of my weakest routines.

"Angie Witmore," I'm up. I stand limping to the bars, applying a thin layer of chalk over my hands, dusting the balls of my feet. Looking up at the lowest bar, I hoist myself up, my hands trembling around the cold metal. Swinging to the next bar, my heart skips a beat as I misjudge the distance, hitting the bar off-centre. My body screams at me to stop, but I don't. I take a deep breath, gripping the bar even tighter. I wobble mid-air, my legs flailing as I try to regain control, doing a straight handstand before doing a twist landing awkwardly on the mat floor, saluting the judges before crumbling to the floor. People rush over to me, concern written all over their faces as they kneel next to me, embarrassed tears streaming down my rosy cheeks. They ask me various questions, and I try to answer, my voice quavering. I shake my head when they ask my parents, and smile at Mia when she runs over to grab my gym bag, setting it down. Unzipping my bag, I dig through until I find my phone and call my Mum. The phone rings three times before she picks up, her cheerful voice filling my speaker.

"Someone wants to speak to you," I immediately say, handing over my phone to the person in front of me. They take my phone and start to speak. I certainly don't hear everything, only a few snippets like 'injury, and might not ever be able to compete again'. They hang up, handing my phone back to me.

"Can you walk?" They ask. With the help of Mia, I stand up, slowly walking away from the bars as a round of applause erupts around me. Each step burns, but I keep my chin up high, refusing to let the tears spill once again. Mia steadies me, her arm firm around my waist. Maybe I won't even compete again. But I finished. I didn't give up.