

Bent
- NOT -
Broken

TEN YEARS OF CREATIVE WRITING FROM
CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN

EDITED BY MICHAEL MOHAMMED AHMAD, WINNIE DUNN AND JULIE KOH

*An initiative of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement
and the City of Canterbury Bankstown*

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Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement:
Street address: Writing and Society Research Centre, 3.G.40, Western Sydney University, Bankstown Campus, Bullecourt Ave, Milperra NSW 2214, Australia.
Mailing address: Sweatshop, Bankstown Campus, 5.G.29, Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797 Penrith NSW 2751, Australia.
Website: www.sweatshop.ws

City of Canterbury Bankstown:
Street address: Civic Tower, 66-72 Rickard Rd, Bankstown NSW 2200, Australia.
Mailing address: PO Box 8, Bankstown NSW 1885, Australia.
Phone: (02) 9707 9000
Website: www.cbcity.nsw.gov.au

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PRODUCTION TEAM

PROJECT COORDINATORS: Justine Foo | Michael Mohammed Ahmad

EDITORS: Michael Mohammed Ahmad | Winnie Dunn | Julie Koh

JUDGES: Michael Mohammed Ahmad | Winnie Dunn | Julie Koh

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Tamar Chnorhokian

DESIGN & LAYOUT: Elaine Lim

SPECIAL THANKS: Michael Campbell, Executive Director, WestWords | Anthony Uhlmann, Director, Western Sydney University Writing and Society Research Centre | Augusta Supple, Senior Manager, Engagement, Partnerships & Development, Create NSW | Mary Malak, Manager, Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service | Christopher Manoski, Community Engagement Officer, City of Canterbury Bankstown

FOREWORD: TEN YEARS CUZ!

2018 is the tenth year that Sweatshop and the City of Canterbury Bankstown have run the annual Youth Week Writing Competition. We decided to mark the occasion by compiling this ten-year showcase, which brings together the top three winners and the most highly commended writers from each year between 2009 and 2018.

Sweatshop began in 2005 as a literacy movement devoted to empowering culturally and linguistically diverse writers from Western Sydney. In 2008, the Youth Development Officer for the former Bankstown City Council, Justine Foo, invited Sweatshop to collaborate with the council to run a local literary competition for the annual Youth Week celebrations. This would be a creative writing competition open to young people aged between ten and twenty-four years old from the suburbs within the Bankstown LGA. In later years, the competition also began to include entries by young people from the suburbs within the Canterbury LGA, after the former Canterbury and Bankstown City Councils amalgamated into the new City of Canterbury Bankstown.

Over the past decade, the competition has attracted more than one thousand entries from culturally and linguistically diverse Canterbury-Bankstown writers and more than one-hundred-and-fifty of those writers have had their work published in the annual anthology, which is to date the longest running literary journal for young people within the south-western suburbs of Sydney. This group of contributors has included writers who were only twelve years old when they first entered the competition and are now graduating from university with degrees in arts and literature. The competition has also provided ongoing training and employment opportunities for dozens of local artists, who have participated as judges, editors, proof-readers, graphic designers, photographers and visual artists for the competition's annual showcase.

Among the most memorable writers to have ever entered the competition is Dorothy Kamal, who was ten years old when we first met her back in 2010. Dorothy submitted a short story called 'Vampire Rage', which received the 2010 Outstanding Junior Award. Her love for words and her passion and energy as a child writer inspired me so much that I went on to work with her for a further two years. Together we produced a book called *Three Novelettes*, in which Dorothy and two other young women under the age of twelve each wrote their own novel. I still remember Dorothy's mother and her baby siblings lugging themselves up the stairs to my Bankstown office every week — wreaking havoc in the rehearsal studios while Dorothy and I conducted our one-hour sessions of editing and critical reading until her small novel was finally ready for publication.

Other notable writers that have emerged from the competition are Amanda Yeo, who has continued to collaborate with Sweatshop and develop as one of the leading voices in Western Sydney literature since she won first place in the competition nine years ago; and Filip Stempien, who went on from the competition to make his own mark on Western Sydney literature as the editor of the 2016 creative writing anthology, *Westside: Truth and Mysteries*.

As an ongoing coordinator, judge and editor of the annual Canterbury-Bankstown Youth Week Writing Competition, it has been most exciting to witness each year the growing focus on stories and poems that reflect the unique cultural diversity of the Canterbury-Bankstown region, which is home to over seventy-two cultural and language groups. Together these works have offered a vivid portrait of life in the south-western suburbs of Sydney, from the hybrid street vernaculars to the kebab shops, parks, shopping centres, loud cars, footy games, local wildlife and bizarre weather patterns. They have also reflected the complex identities and relationships of the people of Canterbury-Bankstown – the Indigenous communities whose ancestors have been here for over 40 000 years, the migrant communities who make South-Western Sydney one of the most culturally diverse places on earth, and the refugee communities who share their stories of fleeing war and poverty to settle peacefully into a duplex on Stacey Street. This incredible list includes our 2018 winners of the competition: Donna Wilson, Christine Wu, Anneliese Joy, Seini Fuko and Mohamad Al-Abdallah. These five exciting new writers each contribute an original work of fiction, which demonstrates that the culture of creative writing in our region is still going strong.

Bent not Broken: Ten Years of Creative Writing from Canterbury-Bankstown is the first South-Western Sydney literary anthology that presents a definitive record of contemporary young writing from the City of Canterbury Bankstown. Whatever the future of literature from our eclectic chunk of Australia may be, I know that this unique document will serve as an inspiration for young writers and readers for generations to come.

Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad

Director of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement

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FLASHBACK

First Place, Eighteen Years Old

— Daniel Bishara —

Blood stains my knuckles, blinds my eyes with the madness of my fury. My face contorts into a perfect picture of pure, animalistic rage. There's no method to my madness. All I want to do is make him hurt. To make him suffer, to bleed and to cry as my fury reigns upon his now horribly disfigured visage. My reason, lost to memory. All there is left...

Crack.

Anger, hatred.

Crack.

Insatiable rage.

Crack.

Revenge,
my bloodthirst,
my purpose.

Crack.

Fuck world justice, it's my turn.

I look down at my knuckles. The kid's tears morphing into the soundtrack of my childhood, the world warping into an unimaginable mass of ever-shifting contours and intangible blurs, my mind stepping back in time.

I become the faceless kid.

I become the pain I bear the brunt of the fury once more.

The image finally settles, body bracing for impact.

Crack. My dreams.

'You'll never amount to anything!'

Crack. My innocence.

'You're a stupid piece of shit!'

Crack. My identity.

'Nothing but a waste of time!'

Crack. My purpose.

'Just stay the fuck out of my way.'

For a split second, the image of my fist and the fist of my father, my beloved creator, my guide and carer, are superimposed. For that split second, I know exactly how he felt as he unburdened his drunken anger towards me, just as mine delivers a final blow to that

faceless kid before me.

All he fathered was my insanity.

All he created was this monster inside, this monster that is !!

My guide? His only path was madness!

My carer? All he cared about was *himself*.

Four broken knuckles.

Four pieces lost.

That kid... He's just like me. Why doesn't he make a move?

Why doesn't he do what I could never do?

But it's too late.

Now it's *my* turn.

My turn to be the monster.

My turn to create hell.

Like father,

Like son.

SWIRLY, BRIGHT ENTITY

Second Place, Seventeen Years Old

— Paul Boustani —

A pulsing
Dominating her senses
Drumming sharply on her veins
She flexes her arms

The music begins
And so too her dance
Her dance of darkness
With an awe-filled crowd

Silence, as of death
The spotlight shines bright on her naked skin
Stiff as though of stone
And so it begins

The swirling, bright entity
As though a liquid so bright
Fills in her veins
Oppressing her blood

In agony
The shatter of drums
Resonating across the walls
Of high-pitched entities

Of which is the cue
For her to make a move
Inhaling the elements
She creates her life-change

With sorrow
Of which her beauty exemplifies
And is overcome
She begins her dance of magic

Slowly and quickly
Her power wanes
With a last mind-piece of flowing ember
She falls and dies
As the swirly, bright entity
Dims and fades away.

LIFE AFTER LEARNING

Third Place, Thirteen Years Old

— Rebekah Bijkovska —

Every kid always goes on about how much they hate school. But in actual fact they like it. If it wasn't for school humans would not socialise with other people until they became adults and had jobs. I myself have always known I loved school. Of course, I acted like I didn't, I mean who's going to be friends with the freak-show who likes school? Anyway, my name is Zach Stewart. I'm seventeen years old, I am in Year 12 and I'm a smart kid – not to sound too arrogant. Unfortunately, I am also very naïve. It didn't occur to me that I would soon be finishing high school and heading out into the real world until I was in my first term of Year 12.

As I walked through the school gates I had my usual toothy grin on my face and my dark curls were swaying in the light breeze. It was a perfect day: the sun was shining, the birds were singing – so to speak – and it was the first day of school, what was not to love?

As I walked down the rocky pathway I could see up ahead my two best friends, Jake and Ryan Collins. Jake and Ryan are twins and they share the same characteristics: blond, gangly and utterly

stupid. When they saw me they ran up yahooing the whole way and after they finally caught up to me we went through the usual small talk. It was actually mostly me and Jake talking. Ryan just stood gazing up at the sky with his mouth hanging open. Out of the two, Jake was the more intelligent. We continued to talk and Ryan broke out of his 'daydream'.

'Come on man, we've got to go. There's something going on in the hall,' Jake said and we slowly walked towards the hall.

We walked in and took our seats. The assembly hall was filled with mixed conversations, most of them about holidays. Mr White, our PE teacher, stood on the stage with a stern look on his full face. It was a strange sight to see because he was always so light-hearted and positive. He never yelled or got angry unless it was necessary. To see him with scruffy hair, tired eyes and an angry expression was rare.

'Silence!' he yelled, interrupting the many voices that filled the hall. 'Now, as we know you are now in your final year of high school.' Cheers arose from everyone and the hall was once again filled with noise. 'I said, quiet!' The chilling roar from Mr White silenced everyone again. 'Now, as I was saying, today is the beginning of the end of your school years. This year your future will be determined by you. It sounds simple enough but don't be fooled. All of you will have to work hard and the harder you work the better off you will be. So, may the best student win.' With that he left. Most of the students took a few seconds to gather themselves before going back to their conversations. It took me more than a few seconds.

The whole day went by in a blur. It was as if I was asleep. My body was there but my mind was somewhere else, somewhere else entirely. I went through the whole day like a zombie. Even throughout Jake and Ryan's mindless squabbles I sat still: wide-eyed and unmoving. It took something unexpected to awaken me from my breakdown. We were in English and Jake was struggling with his work. One thing he said caught my attention: 'Oh no, if I can't figure this out I'll have to repeat.'

The word echoed in my head. That was it. That was the answer to all my problems. I wasn't prepared to study in the wee hours of the night, I wasn't prepared to finish school and I definitely wasn't prepared to go out into the world alone. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my career. This was the best and only option. Jake started to stare at me. I suddenly had a large grin on my face.

'Dude, where have you been? What's going on?' he asked cautiously.

In a calm, quiet voice I replied: 'I am going to get expelled.'



Although I was a lot smarter than Jake he acted more intelligently when he heard my plan. My eyes were filled with excitement whereas his were filled with fear. 'I still don't understand!' groaned Ryan as he fell onto his bed with exhaustion. For half an hour I had been trying to explain my plan to Ryan and Jake but of course it was taking longer than it should have. We were sitting in their room in the blazing heat. My perfect day had changed in more ways than one. The weather was no longer warm like before, now

it was just hot. Jake understood but getting Ryan to understand was a harder task. Like I said before, Jake is dumb, Ryan is dumber. I went through the plan again, only now I sounded much more aggravated. 'Okay, what's going to happen is, I'm going to get myself expelled so I can redo Year 12 and get more prepared. This is the only solution.'

'But that means you will have to endure another year of school,' Jake said, stating a fact I was already aware of and comfortable with.

'I know, I think I'll be able to survive,' I answered, again acting – like everyone else – that our school system did not appeal to me.

'I have a question. How exactly are you planning to get yourself expelled?' Ryan asked, raising a very vital question, one that had not yet crossed my mind. We sat in silence as we all pondered ways that would guarantee my expulsion. It had to be drastic enough to get me expelled but not so drastic that I'd be sent to prison instead of school – though some would say that's the same thing.

The silence continued to linger, the only sounds coming from Ryan's grumbling stomach and the tick-tock of the clock that hung on the wall. Surprisingly it was Ryan who came up with an idea and broke the silence. It all came about when we smelt a strong stench of fish in the air.

'My mum is cooking fish,' Jake said, answering my unspoken question.

Then Ryan, the brainless, childish, irresponsible person that I called my best friend said something that made him a genius in my eyes. 'At least we only have to smell it for twenty minutes while Mum prepares dinner. If I had to smell it any longer I would feel very sick and very angry.'

I sat up, excited. 'We're going to put a dead fish in the principal's office,' I said in a serene calm voice.

'Why?' asked Ryan. Although he'd just had a shining moment of brilliance, his stupidity was still very much intact.

'Think about it, dead fish, hot day, result: disaster,' I replied with a sinister smile. 'All we have to do is sneak in at recess, place a fish in the vent, and drop something on the floor with my name on it... An eraser! What does that spell? Expulsion.'

'Dude, you're a genius!' Ryan said excitedly. Jake however, still looked very uneasy about the whole thing. That didn't worry me because for now, for this small, insignificant moment, everything had fallen into place. Life was good.

The plan was in action. The fish had been bought, the eraser with my name on it was in my pocket and I was mentally prepared, or at least I hoped I was. The plan was to go into Mr Mason's office at the beginning of recess when he went to get his mid-morning coffee. Then I would get on the chair, unscrew the ventilator, place a fish inside and of course, 'drop' my eraser on the floor. Jake was

going to be helping me in the office while Ryan was on guard duty. Ryan being the lookout made me feel a little uncomfortable. As you know he isn't the brightest of the bunch and gets distracted very easily. The bell went. Ryan and Jake rose from their chairs. I did not.

'Are you coming?' Jake asked.

'Yeah,' I breathed. 'Of course.'

We crept silently through the halls of the office. Ryan waited outside while Jake and I went in. I picked up the chair and placed it against the wall. I slowly climbed on top, breathing heavily. I unscrewed the ventilator and Jake handed me the fish, cringing. I placed the fish inside, screwed the ventilator back on and hopped off the chair.

'We did it!' Jake said smiling triumphantly. I smiled also, but just like the person in the horror movie who thinks the killer is dead, or like the person during the eye of a cyclone who thinks it's all over, we had a rude awakening. The sound of the creaking door made Jake and I turn to stone.

The door swung open and Ryan stepped through. Jake and I breathed a sigh of relief.

'Wait, what are you doing here?!' I asked, feeling anger now rather than relief.

'Well, you were taking so long I thought maybe you needed help.' Ryan liked to contribute and when he felt he wasn't, he got extremely needy. I rolled my eyes and started to walk out the door when Mr White appeared, like a ghost, behind Ryan. 'What is going on here and what in God's name is that smell?!' asked Mr White in his booming, loud voice.

'It's fish!' Ryan said proudly, a wide grin on his face.

'Dude!' said Jake, punching his idiotic brother. I just stood there, not saying a word.

'I think I know what's going on. Jake and Ryan you can go but Zach, you come with me.'

'Seeya dude,' Ryan said as he and Jake rushed out of the office.

Mr White turned and signalled with his finger for me to follow. I walked down the long corridor to his office breathing heavily. Everything was silent except for the light tapping on the floor from our shoes. We stepped into his office and he told me to take a seat. He took a deep breath, as if he were preparing himself.

About now you're probably expecting a big, eloquent speech from Mr White telling me that he knows I'm scared and he understands. That I'm a strong confident person who can face anything life throws at me. Well, if you were thinking that, then you would be wrong. What he really said was: 'You put a fish in the principal's office.'

‘Yes,’ I replied quietly.

‘No, don’t speak. I’ve seen students react pretty badly when the realisation of Year 12 hits but I don’t think anything can be compared to this. You’re feeling scared. You’re heading out into the big, bad world and it freaks you out. It’s weak. So, you decide to be *smart* and get yourself expelled so you can have more time to prepare. Now you’re not only weak, you’re stupid.’ Then he paused, trying to figure out what to say next I suppose. ‘The world isn’t as scary as you think. Of course it is at first but like everything else you adjust. Life doesn’t wait for you to be ready. You need to make your move. You need to be great.’

‘But I don’t even know what I want to study at university.’

‘You’ll figure it out. All you need is a sign.’ He walked to his wall – which was filled with certificates – lifted one and left it on his desk in front of me. Then he left the room. I leaned forward and looked at the certificate. It was Mr White’s teaching diploma. *All you need is a sign*. I smiled and walked out of the office. For the first time in my life I felt confident.

An initiative of Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement and the City of Canterbury Bankstown

In 2008, Sweatshop: Western Sydney Literacy Movement and the City of Canterbury Bankstown established the annual Youth Week Writing Competition. Now in this ten-year anniversary showcase which contains the best entries from each year, you are invited to experience a generation of award-winning stories from the backyards of South-Western Sydney.

Featuring short stories and poetry by Donna Wilson, Christine Wu, Anneliese Joy, Seini Fuko, Mohamad Al-Abdallah, Frances An, Rebecca Nguyen, Sarah Hoang, Peviula Taotua, Duc Luu, Tiana Munro, Angeliki Georgakopoulou, Indiana Dinh, Lydia Villavarayan, Christophine Demetrios, Dan Nguyen, Amir Harris, Daniel Kabbara, Yoosuf Mohamed, Maria Rulloda, Danielle Nguyen, Alex Driessen, Ushna Bashir, Filip Stempien, Mehek Fatiha Rahman, Ushna Bashir, Peta Murphy, Brooke Mansell, Isabella Witcher, Mary Tran, Anita Grassy, Sheza Khan, Talia Walker, Amanda Yeo, Luke Lancaster, Rayanne Elhgar, Moslimah Zoud, Dorothy Kamal, Daniel Bishara, Paul Boustani, Rebekah Bijkovska and Arthur Wang.

Edited by Michael Mohammed Ahmad, Winnie Dunn and Julie Koh