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THE YOUNG ADAS SHORT STORY PRIZE 2024

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THE ENTRIES FOR THIS TENTH YEAR OF THE YOUNG ADAS COMPETITION CAME from many different schools and colleges and provided a fascinating glimpse of the imagination of students aged 14–18 living or studying in the Western suburbs. In particular, the judges were struck by the heartfelt emotional involvement that characterized all the stories. The young protagonists (as was the case in almost all the stories) would encounter challenging and sometimes heart-wrenching situations which evoked a wide range of passionate responses. A dazzling array of different narrative voices was used, from the melancholy and troubled to the defiant and optimistic, and the writers were not afraid to confront difficult themes and issues or to explore complex questions of identity and social justice. Some authors stayed close to home and adopted a realist mode, while others created an atmosphere of the uncanny and the mysterious. Some entries to the competition sought to convey a troubled state of mind but were unsure how to adapt this to a story that showed a strong narrative progression through its 1,000 words. The temptation to over-elaborate and deploy a thesaurus-heavy vocabulary was not always resisted, but the best stories showed their youthful authors testing the boundaries of style and vocabulary in surprising ways. The judges admired the young writers' intensity and originality and the urgency with which they shared their themes with their readers.

Following detailed consideration and discussion, ten stories were short-listed by the judges. The comments below suggest how each of them embodied an arresting narrative and original writing. We offer our congratulations to those short-listed and thank all the young writers who took the time to write and submit work to the 2024 Young Adas.

FIRST PRIZE

'Vivace' by Gihara Jayaneththi This story attracted us through its firm structure and emotional intensity. It uses the motif of music to connect two phases of experience (musical performance and illness) and the two characters of the boy and girl. It manages to combine a dream-like and slightly uncanny scenario with telling and convincing details to create a haunting atmosphere. Music and

physical experience are fused in the final scene as the narrator says that ‘my heart pounded fast, so loud, so painful, it felt like punches to my chest. It beat quickly like a string of notes played vivace.’

RUNNER-UP

‘Menarche’ by Sowmya Ghimire This bold and assertive piece captures the writer’s resentment at outmoded gender-based social practices related to female maturation. It does this first through the vivid scene in which the purportedly contaminated soft toy is discarded, its ‘plush white and brown fur’ hitting ‘the rancid bin floor.’ The story moves into a polemic against mistakes the speaker now perceives in her upbringing and uses a strong metaphor of cooking and family life to reinforce the ‘poisonous repercussions of keeping your mouth shut; of bottling your feelings until they hijack your cells.’ This is powerful writing.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

‘Verity’ by Avani Malali This account of the way that a friendship can surmount feelings of inadequacy relies for its effect on the strongly-conveyed personality of the first person narrator: her self-doubt, admiration for the artist Serena, and her surprise when the admiration is reciprocated. The use of the painting as a focus for the growing affection shared by the pair is deftly handled, and the conclusion cleverly replaces the unforgiving mirror of the opening paragraph with the life-affirming portrait painted by Serena.

‘Perfect to Me’ by Ashmi Sarkar The first-person narrator takes us on a journey from all-too-familiar feelings of self-doubt (‘will I ever be enough?’) through the vividly evoked experience of standing up to perform in front of others. The narrative builds up to a triumphant conclusion that combines self-acceptance, the positive response of the audience, and the important role of ‘a significant other’ — someone encouraging in the audience who has ‘the most alluring honey brown eyes.’

COMMENDED

‘Running out of Time’ by Angelica Pham This story appealed to us from the very start, with its clever personification of Time (used again in the conclusion), and the move into a different register, evoking the way that someone can be both ‘a dumb, clueless boy’ and a person who can touch the narrator’s heart with a ‘beauty that is burrowed deep within him.’ The sadness at the end of the relationship is conveyed through poetic and striking images such as the way ‘the night sky turns navy, then purple and finally black.’

‘Daisy and the Oak Tree’ by Mahnoor Talpur Here was something different from most other stories in the competition: a universal fable about the growth of a human life — in this case the

woman Daisy — and its passing, told from the point of view of a tree whose life-span is longer than that of the human. The choice of the tree as narrator contributed to the overall effect of poignancy and acceptance, and the tone is well maintained throughout.

SHORTLISTED

‘A Loving Universe’ by Anjali Bijukumar This an ambitious tale that takes on the history of the narrator’s mother’s illness, the toll it takes upon the daughter as well as the rest of the family, and a semi-mystical conclusion in which the experience of the natural world offers the possibility of acceptance and renewal: ‘the feeling of summer heat on my skin would forever remind me that the world had never been against me, it had always been on my side.’ The judges admired the skill with which these themes are brought within the scope of an 872-word story.

‘The Secrets in the Stars’ by Gurleen Jhaji In 733 words, Gurleen takes us on a journey through young love, the threat posed to it by illness as the beloved becomes ‘pallid, delicate and bruised’, and a phantasmagorical conclusion in which the narrator returns to the scene of former togetherness, apparently seeking their own demise — or is it an accident when ‘the glow of headlights moves closer, the roar of the engine loud enough to wake the night’? There is much vivid writing here, within the romantic scenario of love and death.

‘The Field We Lay In’ by Momina Khan Momina’s tale takes us from friendship to love and experience of special places, and then catastrophe. All this occurs in a compressed and poetic fashion, with a highly emotional tone: ‘I dry my eyes with my sleeves, but they find a way to make a wet mess as I read the contents of the letter.’ There are hints of consolation in the finale, however.

‘Free Mandalay’ by Muskan Pant Muskan’s story recreates in fast-moving detail the plight of a family in strife-torn Myanmar, from loss of their home and separation, to embarkation — perhaps to safety — on a boat. There is much to cover here by way of context and events and emotions, and the content almost overwhelms the number of words available, but the judges admired the ambitious scope of the narrative and its heartfelt nature.