

## CENTENERY OF CANBERRA AWARD

Saba Vayani-Lai

Winner

Glenwood High School  
GLENWOOD NSW

### Canberra's Song, Morphing

1. There is beauty in  
Simplicity,  
In air thick with insects and  
Kangaroo-sweet fire, roasted strands of grass  
Sprouting from the earth's flaky scalp like  
Uncut hair.

Night-time,  
The wind is trying her hand at  
Opera –  
Her off-key soprano vibrating through  
Mouthfuls of warm air,  
Sending flames squirming  
Like toes when they are tickled.

We reach into a star-cluttered sky,  
Catching Bogong moths between hungry fingers –  
Oh, how they struggle, dying in the  
Firelight –

How alive,  
How terribly alive,

Wriggling moth bodies, crisped flesh,  
The outer shell fizzing into atmosphere to reveal  
Succulent, melting syrupiness,  
Coating our teeth and tongues and mouths and  
faces  
In summertime.

This is Kanbarra, meeting place of the  
Ngunnawal,  
Where moths tangle themselves in  
Half-baked summer air, where rich soil  
Is smeared across skin like  
Saliva, sticky.

This is Kanbarra.

2. There is beauty in  
Complexity,  
In these city streets all lined up –  
The Lego blocks

Of men.

The air is thin, playful,  
Mussing hair and  
Blowing tickling kisses  
At coat-laden passers-by.

We find shelter under  
A street lamp,  
Revel in the electricity pooling over  
Shivering shoulders:  
The softest snow blanket.  
Like all good presents  
We are bundled heavy in mittens and scarves and  
hats –  
Maybe if you lean in,  
You can catch a smile  
From mashed, frost-bitten lips,  
Fizzing, fire-licked eyes.

This is Canberra, the meeting place of Australia,  
Where we trace an engraved Coat of Arms and  
imagine  
Kangaroo-sweet fires, roasted strands of grass;  
Where we join the bustling Café-on-Wheels queue,  
Puff out frost and pretend to be dragons.  
My mother flashes her Centrelink card  
As though it matters,  
And we close eager palms around Styrofoam cups,  
Savouring the soupy slide of

Salt,  
Chicken, chives,  
Carrot cubes,

Wholesome and slipping down the throat like  
Liquid sunshine,  
Stretching warmth to fingertips and sprinkling stars  
into  
Eyes.

This is Canberra.

*Judge's Comments:*

*This poem is, quite simply, outstanding-- sophisticated, insightful and always engaging. The observations are those of a writer of impressive maturity. The poem's seemingly effortless quality is maintained throughout, a rare thing in a poem from someone of Saba's age. The juxtaposition of eras and civilisations is so effective because the observations (and delightful images) never lapse into cliché. They are exact and tactile, the stuff of real poetry. The reader is provided with fresh insights into our unique capital city, and its region. Deserving winner*