Splendid isolation: the winners of our creative writing competition

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The winners of the *MJA* Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize were announced at the inaugural Dr Eric Dark Memorial Dinner, held at the Fairmont Resort in Leura, New South Wales, on Saturday 10 March 2012. The prize is sponsored by Varuna, the Writers' House and "Doctors Who …", a Varuna initiative to nurture creativity, innovation and advocacy in the medical profession.

Named in memory of Dr Eric Dark (1889–1987), Australian general practitioner and public health activist, the *MJA*'s new writing competition obviously inspired many of our readers: there were 110 entries based on the theme of "splendid isolation", with a very high overall standard. We needed all the help we could get from the creative writing experts at Varuna and our new literary editor, Dr Leah Kaminsky, to come to a final decision!

The winners were Dr Susan Fox, a GP from Daylesford, Victoria, in the medical practitioners category, and Australian National University medical student Paulina Wojciechowska in the medical students category.

Both winners attended a 2-day writing workshop at Varuna, led by Dr Hilton Koppe and Dr Kaminsky, on the same weekend as the dinner. The medical practitioners prize also includes a 1-week residential writing retreat at Varuna.

We thank our external judges and, of course, those of you who shared your stories and insights with us. Keep writing and watch out for the announcement of next year's competition.

MJA *editorial staff congratulate the winners: (L-R) Dr Tania Janusic, Dr Annette Katelaris, Dr Susan Fox, Paulina Wojciechowska, Dr Ruth Armstrong, Dr Astika Kappagoda.* ◆

Eric Dark (painting): inspiring doctors to create, innovate and advocate; pictured with "Doctors Who …" panel members Dr Michelle Cahill and Dr Hilton Koppe. ◆

Hands off the breech

Winner *MJA* Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize
(Practising and retired doctors category)

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"The baby's breech, come quickly." The midwife's voice was sharp and squeaky. She had already hung up the phone. My head, muddled with sleep, began to pound. I staggered out of bed, stripped off my pyjamas and dragged on an old shirt and jeans, pulling my straggly hair into a rough ponytail. I grabbed my jacket on the way out the door.

Outside, the mist enveloped me in stillness. An early morning frost had coated the windscreen with ice. I scraped it with my hand, but it was stuck tight. I turned the car's heater on full, put the windscreen wipers on to maximum and pulled out of the driveway. With my head out the window, I could just negotiate my way between the gum trees lining the road. The mist swirled kaleidoscopically in the headlight beams. My eyes began to water, and I wiped them with fingers numb from the cold. As I finally reached the highway, I pushed down harder on the accelerator, trying not to spin my tyres on the icy bitumen.

In the birth room of the tiny rural hospital, Matildhe was emitting short, low moans in between loud pants. Julie had got Matildhe's legs up in stirrups, but she was lopsided on the bed. I pulled her buttocks to straighten her up. I noticed my hands were shaking as I took up position between Matildhe's legs. She smiled briefly at me with her mouth but her eyes were fixed on the wall behind me.

The baby's buttocks were visible, with thick bottle-green meconium oozing out of the anus. There was no one else to call for help; the other GP in town was on holiday. Julie was the only nurse on duty for our small country hospital, and this baby was coming soon. Julie was an experienced midwife but I doubted she had delivered many vaginal breech babies in the past 20 years or so. The only breech birth I'd ever seen was when I'd been called in to observe as a medical student; I had been one of twenty or so people in the room. I shuddered.