

CAMPBELLTOWN

WRITER'S COMPETITION



2023 WINNERS ANTHOLOGY

Open Writer (25+ years)

First

Alison Richards for
"Nesting"

Runners Up

Nick Iadanza for
"The End of Autumn"

Therese Gates for
"Seasons with my Mother"

Youth Writers (15-24 years)

Malana Elizabeth Treulieb-Berk
for "Strawberries"

Cienna Whitton for
"The Drive"

Isabella Fischetti for
"What Blooms in Spring
dies in Winter"

Junior Writers (7-14 years)

Chloe Scarlett Miels for
"Change isn't Bad"

Chloe Staykov for
"A Sacrifice for Love"

Mya Jaye Verwey for
"No Shillings"



Nesting by Alison Richards

Spring 2003

The magpie wove another stick into the nest, warbling as she worked.

‘Nearly there,’ Patrick said, sprawled out on the cool grass of the riverbank below.

‘And what do you know about such things, Mr Parker?’ Mary squeezed his leg and put her book by her side. He couldn’t imagine ever getting tired of her voice. He drank in every word. Her head was a comforting weight in his lap. They’d watched the magpie pair for a month, and the nest had come a long way.

‘Not much, I expect.’ He stroked her face, pushed her chestnut hair out of her chestnut eyes and traced her features so he’d never forget them. In truth, he lived with his breath held, believing it was just a matter of time for the other shoe to drop. He’d wake up and find it had all been a dream. Mary hadn’t chosen him, after all. The thought of it froze him in place. He shuffled his body to shield her eyes from the afternoon sun. ‘But I don’t much care for the way he’s looking at us.’

Patrick nodded up to a second magpie, heftier than the little girl, with bead-like eyes keeping a close eye on proceedings. He gave a short high pitched warning call and swooped low over their heads to perch in front of the nest.

‘They’re a good team, don’t you think?’ Mary said.

‘Too good. Let’s head in.’

Patrick helped her up, remembering the embarrassment early on of his calloused, cracked hands on her soft skin. How big and clumsy he’d felt around her. Now he held her hand tight, a familiar treasure in his palm. They moved side by side, their footsteps in perfect time. It was only a moment’s walk from the riverbank, over the Linear trail path up to their place.

Mary'd joked that she wanted to live in paradise. Patrick had smirked like a schoolboy the first time he pulled into the driveway of the house at the end of the cul-de-sac on Willow Drive, Paradise. Her eyes grew wet, happy tears he hoped, as he parked beside the for-sale sign plastered with a red SOLD sticker. It might not have been the paradise of Mary's dreams, but it was the one Patrick could afford. Every pay since meeting her, in fact, had gone towards the delicate diamond sitting on her finger and the downpayment on the Willow Drive three-bedroom weatherboard.

She was too good for him. Everyone thought it. Mary's father had even said it aloud, and even though that man was not one to talk about goodness, Patrick tended to agree. But there'd been a moment that day as Mary burst out of the Corolla, kicked off her sandals and spun circles on the front lawn where Patrick hoped he would prove everyone wrong.

Mary ignored the yellowed grass, the overgrown weeds and the scrap metal littering the yard. And if she noticed the cracked moss-covered roof tiles and gutters over-flowing with debris she didn't let on. Instead, she smiled up at the run-down renovator's delight, dug her toes into that patch of earth, their patch of earth, and called to Patrick to get out of the car.

'There's more,' he said, taking her hand in his. He led her to the boundary, pointed around the thick trunks of Eucalypts to the Torrens, snaking its way past their small piece of paradise. The two magpies they now knew so well had sat on the rusted chain link fence that day, their carolling like a welcome song to the newlyweds

The smaller of the birds had pounced on a mess of dry grass by Mary's feet, flew towards the river and up into a tall Eucalypt, tucking the strands into a messy, half formed dome nest. The larger bird followed, perched nearby, standing guard.

Patrick had pulled Mary back towards the house, circled her waist and held her in his arms. He carried her up the driveway and over the threshold of the front door, into the entrance of their new home.

‘It’s not much now – ’ he began, ready to tell her about his plans to replace the weatherboards with crisp new timbers, the white picket fence he’d ordered to replace the prison-style chain link, the roofers he’d booked to swap out the cracked tiles. He was ready to say all this, but she interrupted him before he had a chance. It was barely a whisper, just quiet words from her heart to his. ‘It’s perfect.’

They made love that first night, on a cotton blanket on the floor of their new bedroom, since there’d been no money left for furniture. Mary buried her face, cheeks wet with tears into Patrick’s chest, breathing in the earthy, honest goodness of him. She whispered again, more words only he could hear. ‘I love you, you know?’

And outside the open window, down by the river, two magpies continued their duet and worked on the nest. There was work to be done. But there was time.

They laid still afterward, exhausted, hair mussed, limbs tangled. Their heartbeats changed to match the other like clockwork. Patrick spoke into her ear as Mary drifted off to sleep, hoping more than ever he could prove everyone wrong. He said the words again and again, stroking her silk smooth back. He couldn’t believe his dumb young luck, that he should be the one saying them.

‘You’re home now.’

Spring 2013

The magpie's cry came in the small hours of the morning. Down by the river, from the direction of the nest. An alarm call into the black night. The smash of glass came next. Patrick's arm searched across the mattress for Mary, a reflex. But the space between them had grown so much his hand came up empty. Who knew such a chasm was possible in a queen bed?

Another smash of glass followed the first. Bottles, perhaps. And jeering. Boys out late at night, playing at being men. The skid of bike tyres. The magpie's high-pitched cries. The whip-whip of wings through sky.

Patrick moved again, further into no man's land. He moved blindly. Found her. Mary's body was rigid, and he hoped it had more to do with the night noises than her response to his touch. He inched closer again. Slow. Wary. It was as if the last decade had meant nothing, and they were strangers. He tried to pinpoint when things had changed, but he didn't know where to begin.

'I'm here,' he said, though perhaps it came out more as a question. Searching for permission. She allowed it and moved into him a little. They listened a moment more, heads cocked towards the window. Patrick could tell she was holding her breath, waiting.

'Are you sure the back door's locked?' she whispered.

'Yes. Positive.'

He caught a glimpse of her face in the moonlight. Her eyes were so swollen she must've been crying for hours, in silence. He loosened his arm from around her, shame creeping over him for not hearing a thing. For not knowing how to fix things. But Mary grabbed at his retreating hand, squeezed it to her chest. 'Stay.'

'Try to get some sleep.' Patrick whispered it because he had nothing else to say, and it seemed he had to say something.

Their heads found the pillow again, but sleep did not come. Sleep and grief didn't often sit side by side. Patrick held her close. It was like coming home from somewhere far away. Safe. Breathing was easier, somehow, the closer they were.

As Patrick shifted his weight in the bed his hand slipped down onto her stomach. He pulled back quick, hoping in her half sleep she hadn't noticed. He watched it rise and fall with her breath, wanting to both remember and forget the shape of her earlier that year. And how there was nothing left of what could have been.

Patrick pushed the memory away before the next could follow. Of Mary, aching and breaking on their bathroom floor, the tiles slick with dark blood. The rusty smell of it. The beginning of the end. It hadn't been the first time. But Patrick had sensed it may have been the last.

He didn't sleep. As dawn crept across the sky Patrick slipped out of bed and squeezed Mary's arm as he left. Beside the trail the Torrens stood still. His sneakers, laces left untied in his hurry, crunched over broken green glass, the beer bottles of the youth's late night gathering.

The two magpies perched overhead, quiet and watchful. Something had changed in them. Patrick looked up for the nest, but as he expected the branch sat empty. He rubbed his brow, knelt and searched the grass with careful sweeps, hoping he was wrong until he found the first pieces amongst the broken glass. Cracked. Scattered through the grass. Blue green and speckled, the eggshells were smooth like polished glass against their jagged edges. They were almost paper thin. The magpies watched. He thought back to the jeers and taunting laughter of the previous night. The magpie's cry. The cruelty of it stoked a darkness in his chest, red hot. The eggs were empty, though, as they had been each year. Ten years and always empty. The female would build her nest, lay her eggs, and the male defended the stretch of path below her. Even Patrick and Mary weren't safe by the river for

those weeks each Spring. But it all came to nothing. Eventually the female kicked them out. Like she couldn't bare to have them under her a moment longer. He pictured Mary, still in their bed, cradling her stomach, clinging to what they'd lost inside.

Patrick's hand pressed on something in the grass, and he pulled back. It was small. Small but there. A chick. Black and grey, stiff legs, bloated belly, an army of ants already at work. He dropped the eggshells and dusted the ants away, cradled the chick in cupped hands. Its body was limp. He shielded it from the magpie pair, as if he could keep them from their loss. But they'd already flown off. Maybe it was only human, then, to dwell on what is lost.

He made a shallow grave near their fence. The white picket fence he'd promised Mary. The weatherboard house was becoming everything he'd promised her, in fact. They were fixing it up together, bit by bit. Because that's how you make a home. Not all at once, not hurried or impatient, but piece by piece, as time and money and circumstances permit.

He covered the chick over, patted the soil down. He stayed there, kneeling in the freshly turned dirt, fearful of heading back inside. Even from where he sat, he heard her through the open window. He pictured her there, on her side of that too wide queen bed. It was normal, the doctor said. After something like that. Perfectly normal. But Patrick didn't agree. All he saw was a chest heaving, bone crushing, heart breaking grief. A grief he felt he had little right to share. A grief he feared would kill her. He didn't move from the spot. He couldn't. Instead, he placed his hands on the earth over the chick, bent low and spoke words he knew it wouldn't hear. But he spoke them anyway, because he had nothing else to say, and it seemed he had to say something. Part apology. Part prayer. Part promise.

'You're home now.'

Spring 2023

Patrick cracked the walnuts in his fist and picked out the flesh from the hard shells. When the pile was sufficient, he pulled up the front of his shirt, swept the nuts off the bench and into it like a pouch and headed down the hall. He'd opened every window that morning for the first time in months. It'd been winter until that week, and besides, he hadn't been ready. Now the warm spring light filtered through the house.

Out in the yard he tossed the walnuts over the picket fence. Three magpies swept in, like homing pigeons, and squabbled over the rich nuts. The three adolescents from last year's clutch. Their parents watched from the tree above. There was no nest being built that year, Patrick noted. Perhaps they were too old. Or perhaps the three youngsters were enough, after so many years of empty eggs.

Patrick walked back to the veranda, laced up his sneakers and took the Linear path east. Most of the day he walked the trail, first east, as far as he felt the need, then west for as long as it took to walk the heaviness from his body. But it'd been a year of walking, and the days were numbered. Messages were piling up on his phone. His boss. He was needed back at work. And even though it was very human indeed, he'd discovered, to dwell on what is lost, the world still turned, regardless.

Late in the afternoon he checked his watch and turned back for home. He made it up to the school in time to hear the bell. A gaggle of children burst from classrooms. Scraped knees, snotty noses, brows sweaty from learning, gap toothed and weary, the little ones found their parents and emptied from the schoolyard. When the girl's hand slipped into Patrick's from behind, he gripped it tight. How empty it had been all day without her hand in his. He picked her up and swung her round and breathed her in. Her hair was chestnut, but mixed with his blonde, too. And he still lived, like he always had, waiting for the other

shoe to drop. He held her tight. She nuzzled into his neck and whispered the words she'd said on repeat for a whole year. Words that just about broke him in two.

'I miss her, Dad.'

'Me too.'

She jumped over the cracks in the pavement, tugging his arm with each step. The weight of her hanging there gave him purpose. He didn't know who had held who up most lately. He feared she'd done the lion's share, and he promised silently he'd stop walking the path each day. He'd get back to work. It was time.

'How was school?'

She shrugged. 'Just ok.'

They turned the corner and the three-bedroom weatherboard stood at the end of the cul-de-sac. A piece of paradise. Just like he'd promised. Something pinched in his lower back, and he stopped and bent forward.

'Still sore?' the girl asked, rubbing his back. He nodded, tried to swallow the tears down but they spilled out. He hoped she'd think they were for his back alone. She took his hand again; her palm was warm with life. She pulled him forward and pushed open the white picket fence when they came to it. A chorus of magpies carolled somewhere down by the river.

'It's ok,' she said. 'You're home now.'

The End of Autumn

by Nick Iadanza

'What do you mean you lost her?' A sharp crackle entered my voice from the back of my throat as I pulled my seatbelt on.

'Well...uh, during afternoon observations she was there and...' the lady from the nursing home faltered and cleared her throat.

'...then when we went to her room to get her for dinner she... wasn't there.'

A stony silence weighed heavy on the line. I imagined that there were three to four directors and ward managers huddled around the line waiting for what I would say next. My chest thumped and I could feel a wellspring of rage and fear and heat and terror pooling up from within me. But I closed my eyes, clenched my fist around my phone and took a breath. A shaking voice cleared its throat on the end of the line. Was it kind nurse Carol who had been my nonna's guardian angel for the last six months? Did they force her toward the phone with frantic hands so she could make the call. They probably were thinking I couldn't get angry at Carol and thus could stave off any potential lawsuit against them for losing my frail 86-year old dementia riddled family member. My only family member. Whoever it was on the line, I was too flustered to notice.

'Mr Marconi, we promise we have every available staff member combing the streets of Campbelltown. She can't have gone far and we...' I hung up. Enough of Carol... or Maria or Rashmi or whoever else was trying to keep me calm. I threw my phone across the front seat of the car, took another deep breath and pulled out from the parking lot. I could be there in 6 minutes tops. I would find her. I had to.

The late afternoon sun was puncturing the air in orange bursts as I drove past house after house. Laneways and parkways. Streets and avenues. Autumn was finally about to give way to the invisible push of winter's fingers. The trees were shedding the last of their vestments, but still carpeting the pavements with skeletal brown foliage in earnest. Standing between these thinning canopies, the cream-brick homes so popular amongst migrant families in the 60s and 70s began to warp into an endless streak of beige patterns. A muted kaleidoscope that fragmented behind my searching eyes. Although the panic was gnawing at my very marrow, I couldn't help but think of the quaint charm of these oh-so familiar backstreets. Fruit trees lining fruit lawns. Rambling prickly pear bushes colonising fence-work. Concrete driveways joining concrete gardens, once so fastidiously kept by the Italians of my nonna's generation. I turned the wheel and drove past a squat yellow family home. It was where Nonna and I had once come for the lutto of her Zia Rosalba, a kindly sprite of a woman who sold carnations from her garden every Mother's Day. I wondered if anyone ever bought carnations to her gravestone now. Why hadn't I?

Further past the playground was the brown brick 60s-suburban of Silvana, the crostoli lady, and just behind her fruit block was the Sorrentino family who had tried desperately to set me up with their daughter back when I was just eleven. They brought her every Saturday to the continental deli where I worked stacking shelves until they finally got the hint that I was more interested in Pokemon cards than old village-style matchmaking. Just one street later I drove past the row of two-storey homes where Pepe di Castagne had lived, the man whose name simply became what he was known for: chestnuts. He too had ended up at Green Creek Nursing Village. And while he never escaped like my Houdini of a nonna, he did leave not long ago. I was pulling into the parking lot one morning when his body was being loaded

into the funeral home's van after a year-long battle with cancer. Even chestnuts adhere to the whims of the seasons.

My zigzagging scouring of the network of streets brought everything screaming back to me. This was a place of heritage. All around me there was history. Our history. It stood sentry on each street corner and every bending curve of the roads which wrapped around creek-beds with the same lively silence as family photos. Sometimes shadowed in time, but not forgotten. Tiny dots of Italian life which had found refuge on the other side of the world in a perfect enclave of community and tradition, huddled under the native eucalypts which had been here since time immemorial. It was a suburb that had nurtured family and traditions in a free-flowing stream through time, just like the creek bed that trickled its way down from the hills and eventually out to sea. A sea that had once brought the very people who built the community all the way to its home, nestled at the feet of the Adelaide ranges.

It was getting late and I had been driving for thirty minutes. The late May evenings were getting cold. She couldn't be left out here at night. The panic was rising and I could feel pinpricks of hot tears forming in the corner of my eyes. I pulled over along the creek and stopped the car.

'Damn it!' I hit the steering wheel with my palm. I didn't know what else to do. The futility of the search was dawning on me. She could have wandered into someone's backyard guided by the lemon trees in the front lawn thinking they were her own. The homes are eerily similar; a symptom of a suburb which blossomed near overnight in the post-war prosperity the land Down Under offered. She could be anywhere. She could have fallen over and be lying in a gutter. She could have been picked up by a stranger who was bad news or worse, stumbled in front of a car and now be.... I shook the thoughts from my head. No. She would

be fine. Calm down, Daniel. She had survived much worse than an unaccompanied afternoon stroll through her own suburb. She was strong too. Even though her mind had now receded back into mist, her body was still freakishly capable. I thought back to the arm wrestle we had on her 75th birthday where she legitimately beat me in my cockiness to ‘take it easy on her’ in case I broke one of her bones. My wrist killed for a week... She even used to scale the rocky banks of the creek bed like a jackrabbit, laden down with heavy buckets so she could gather water for her favi beans. *‘Bah!’* she used to say. *‘I no like this-a shit from the tap. Queste l’acque e piu meglio’*. Joggers would pass by in confusion as to why an elderly woman in a full length-skirt and headscarf looked like she was panning for gold in the Eastern suburbs. I chuckled at the memory of the nimble way she picked herself across the rocky riverbank. *That’s it*. It dawned on me. I knew where she would be.

The sharp crags of the creek pierced my feet through my work shoes. I had come straight from the office and now, proceeding on foot, I must have looked like a real sight. If those same joggers who had seen Nonna all those years came past now they would think there was something really sinister about this particular catchment zone. The creek was only at half strength. More rains were on the horizon and soon it would become a thriving pulse that babbled and bounced through the entire gully. More memories of childhood days trying to catch tadpoles and water bugs intruded upon my mind, diverting me from my mission. I looked ahead. Just a few more bends and I would be there. I could tell by the looming canopy of evergreen leaves mixed with the autumnal parade of reds and browns. The water was starting to be adorned with brittle webbings of foliage which had shed from the trees in a yearly dance, soon to head down stream back toward that same ocean that received so many

journeys and wanderings. As the red river gums arched together, the banks spread out like two open palms, inviting those to stop their jog, their walk, their daily commute and to pause. I neared the final corner and craned my neck to see. I was looking for that bench. And as it materialised in the distance, I found her. Sitting on the bench was the dark outline of a tiny woman. She sat in perfect contemplation and calm staring out to the familiar sweep of the creek bed and the weaving street behind it. My chest exhaled and relief swept every fried neuron in my body. My adrenal glands were slow to respond to the relief. Slowly my body started talking to itself: *'Lights off boys. Everything's okay. Daniel needs us to calm. Send a little more oxygen to his lungs and let's call it a day'*. I stood still and let the calmness wash over me. She wasn't injured. In fact, she looked the happiest she had in months. She sat so still. Smiling in that patient manner you no longer saw in people, as if the mere act of waiting was the purpose. Her hands were clasped together and, while I wasn't close enough to see, I knew she would be twirling her wrinkled thumbs together in a smooth rolling motion. Her signature move. She always did it when she sat, as if to pay tribute to a life of constant movement and toil and energy. I scrambled up the sloping riverbed and caught her eye.

'Ah, Ecco! Gionnino. Come stai?' She smiled and her ice blue eyes sparkled with life in the dying light of the day.

'No, it's me Daniel.' A pang of hurt through my heart. She thought I was my Nonno. Her husband.

'Nonna, are you okay? You must be...' She reached out her hand and pulled me down to sit next to her on the bench. It was a place she had sat so many times before. Every afternoon at 4pm she would trek down to the riverbank and wait here, sitting amongst the coming night. While she was slowly ambling down to the creek, Nonno would be making the long journey toward the hills from the Westinghouse factory on the other side of town. Here

they would meet Summer heat or Winter rain. She would sit, sometimes with a pram or tiny feet scampering around, and wait for her husband to get off the bus across the street at 'Stoppa Fiffa-teen' and then, arm in arm, they would walk back home together for dinner of pasta and wine. A 40-year ritual still imprinted somewhere on the darkened corridors of her memory.

'*You must-a be affamato*', she squeezed my hand and softly spoke her comforting mix of Italian and broken English. '*Andiamo Gionnino. Let's go home-a. I make pasta.*' She slowly stood up to go. I gently tugged her hand.

'*No Nonna. Let's sit.*' She stopped, confused. She looked at my face and could see my own ice blue eyes welling up with pinpricks of water. I smiled.

'*A bit longer, please?*' At that, she relented and sat down.

'*Allora*'. She held my hand tightly and as we stared out across the creek and down the rolling valley which reached out toward the sea, the last of the afternoon sun ebbed behind rooftops. Winter was on the horizon, save for this last fleck of Autumn warmth which would go and then, come again.

Word Count: 1981

Seasons with my Mother by Therese Gates

Her gnarled hands moved, fingers clasping, wringing, fidgeting, still, then round and round, again and again. Furtive eyes looked without recognition, a wisp of anxiety sliding across. She told me her daughter was coming today, I told her I was already here. ‘Oh yes, there you are’ she laughed, feigning recognition. Those same hands that had held me as a child now wrung out her memories, and as she slowly disappeared, so did many answers I’d been waiting a lifetime to hear. Her treasure chest of secrets now defiantly lost, scattered. We were in our last season together.

As I sat, memories jostled for attention, taking me back to the early 50’s with its cultural norms and set gender roles, and then there was my mum, who didn’t quite fit. She was an enigma and I doubt if anyone ever really knew her. I certainly didn’t. She was full of energy and would attend parties with great panache, eyes twinkling with delight as she flirted with possibility and danger. Men found her attractive, and she was beautiful. Women were wary. When asked, she would glide over her history with nebulous stories that could not be verified. I was a child so no one asked me, and I dare not contradict. I worked hard to keep her approval and stay close. Yes, there were times when I thought I may be left behind.

It began when we boarded the ship from Sydney, my younger sisters and I unaware that we were leaving sunshine and laughter behind. A grey and dripping England greeted us with its cramped houses and dull brown interiors. We were to stay with dad’s parents until he could afford his passage.

“Just a couple of months and I’ll be with you”, he’d said, reassuringly.

They were conservative and polite people and mum valiantly displayed her best, but it wasn’t enough. She couldn’t hide the shock and disappointment of coming to this cold grey land. The image of England’s green and pleasant pastures was not yet evident. The adults

seemed ill at ease; the growing tension was uncomfortable. I wasn't expecting to be woken early and quietly leave for another 'adventure', a train ride. I later came to learn that on the ship mum had met someone who was full of promises and stories, and now she was desperate enough to believe him. We rode to a winter of distress, three girls aged six and under, heading for Edinburgh.

The man met us with dark brooding eyes, charming at first, but time revealed a meanness, heralded by drunkenness and impatience. As the slums closed ranks, the flat greeted us with its musty smell of damp and mould. With nowhere else to go she rolled up her sleeves and just got on with it. I missed my dad and dreamt of when he would rescue us. I was sure he would.

It took a year for him a year to find us, but elation turned to confusion as he demanded, mum cried, and I watched him take my sisters. I wanted to scream and cry and beg to go with him, but my voice wouldn't work, he didn't want me. He'd left me behind in this grey world with a 'mean' man and depleted mum. She told me she was glad I was with her, but could I trust her? I felt numb and cold as winter encroached on our relationship. It became barren in that unpredictable world.

Relief came on the morning mum packed the case and included my clothes. She left the baby with him. We left Edinburgh, the cold still clinging as the train made for England. My eyes were watchful, actions designed to please, my mind seeking safety, and the ever-present fear and uncertainty as companions. I needed my mum, for her love, strength, and protection. Before long she found work, accommodation, and admirers, of course. They would talk kindly to me, but I wasn't fooled. The experiences of 'mean man' had taught me not to trust the fawning smiles and compliments.

By the grand age of ten mum had married again - settling for a quiet friendly man who was besotted with her. I came to name him the gambling man because he would be glued to the telly on Saturdays, the droning voice of racing commentators and his constant cups of tea. He was the one she stayed with because she had a plan. There was no doubt about it, my mum may have been restless and emotionally unattached, but she was resourceful and determined and smart.

There's nothing quite like passing through various schools to make me feel stupid. I couldn't seem to catch up, understand, or blend in. The Aussie accent kept me as a figure of difference and amusement. I also realised my family was different. Through schoolyard conversations I learnt that most kids had the same mum and dad, and their mums seemed to stay at home and bake biscuits and seemed happy and attentive. My mum worked two jobs and was always busy. But what would I know, I was a child who read stories of rejected children and great reunions with doting parents. I wished and hoped ... and waited and watched ...

Aunts, uncles, and grandparents existed in other children's lives, and I looked on enviously. Finally, we settled in one place for a few years, and I made a friend from around the corner whose parents and grandparents lived side by side. As they enfolded me into their lives, I hungered to belong. I remember having a run of nightmares and one night, fled my home, ran around the corner, and woke his parents. They represented safety at 2am in the morning.

Gradually stability and routine helped me settle. Mum made friends, we did things together and our relationship transitioned from a distrusting winter, into the springtime of growth and possibility. She loved celebrations and Christmas, so every year we lugged a real tree into the house and transformed our ordinary lives into fantasy. The most memorable

present I received was a record player – and thus began my love of music. I transitioned through various trends and friends, from skinheads to disco, pop and folk music, reggae, and rock festivals. I was growing up and allowed more freedom, loved fashion, had boyfriends, left school and worked in London. When gambling man tried to control me, storms rumbled, but I simply ignored and stopped talking to him. My mum was as pragmatic as usual: fine if I didn't want to talk to gambling man; fine if I wanted to go out with friends; and fine if I didn't want to be part of her plan to return to Australia. WHAT!

At 17 I waved her off as she, her husband and young son flew to her homeland. I was grateful she had encouraged my independence and felt the surge of new life. I found a flat, and flatmate and immersed myself into the 60's for the next two years. Some of her resourcefulness had rubbed off on me. We wrote letters chronicling our different experiences. By this time I'd navigated my way to the hippies and found a place where I could belong, the music, clothes, deep conversations, demonstrations, rock concerts, colour, Monty Python and the like. Work week in London and crazy weekends.

I could have stayed, I wanted to, but change was coming. There have been a few times in my life where I've felt a deep pull toward a different path. This was one of those times and I knew it was time to pack up and leave for Australia.

Spring is a mixture of increased warmth along with rain and storms, but I wasn't expecting a tornado. Obtaining my birth certificate ripped away a layer of my life. The 'kind man' wasn't my dad, and mum had previously been married with children. It all made sense why he'd taken my sisters and left me behind, the way people looked at me, the secrets. I couldn't shake off the anger and shame. I couldn't navigate the see-saw of loving and needing mum yet hating her. It changed who I thought I was and as I packed and returned to South Australia, I fully intended to confront her, demand answers, and find my dad.

I landed in sunshine and memories and mum was prepared – she knew the storm would come one day. She was warm and friendly, proudly showing off their new home with a room for me, she was working hard as usual, had friends and parties. She was ‘home’. Gambling man now restricted with his bets; she was in charge. It caught me off balance for a while and the see-saw tipped in her direction. I needed her again, wanted to be part of her now happy life. But in time the gremlins slowly crept to the surface. The war cry of ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’, couldn’t be kept quiet.

It was a warm Sunday morning when I asked to speak to her privately. Trying to keep calm and conversational I asked the question. She simply turned her head and looked away, securely locking the vault where reasons and memories were stored and throwing away the key. I yelled, pleaded, and then, as rage erupted, stomped away, slamming the door. My mother was not one to smooth things over, or be bullied, her business was her business. We never spoke of it again but her lack of emotional support and understanding changed my relationship with her. Spring was coming to an end.

I stayed a while, worked, studied, then married and moved to the country. Mum wished me well, but I left feeling we were parting ways. I was determined to never be like her, but the unresolved emotional load set the pendulum swinging into a brutal summer. A hot anger began to fill my hollow place, and as it grew I took to a moral high ground. Wanting to punish her in the courtroom of my mind, and armed with a long list of grievances, I judged and declared her guilty. She was locked away in my dungeon and I made the decision to stop having contact with her. These bitter thoughts and feelings swung me from the ‘All you need is love’ hippy, to a rigid victim. I didn’t understand that under the anger lay all the hurt and sadness and uncertainty.

The summer of our relationship now lay bare under a fierce sun, and as I camped in the desert, the ground dried out. In time I realized I was stuck. I didn't need opinions or justifications, what I needed to do was take down the tent and walk to a clearer mental and emotional space. Even my body was complaining with migraines and stomach issues. Bother!

It took years of self-reflection, talking, reading, and a willingness to work through my insecurities. I learnt from my children, husband, friends, life's ups and downs. Gradually the curious 'hippy' returned and asked questions. Not everyone does, but I needed a wise listener/counsellor to help me navigate this emotional mess. In doing so I connected with the fearful child, the angry teenager, and the insecure adult who was now tired of judging. As these hurt parts gathered to tell their stories a deeper 'me' listened, and together, moving slowly, we wove a messy path toward understanding and self-care. I learnt how to open that dungeon door and release my mum. In the process, I did the same for myself.

We moved again, to Campbelltown, closer to memories that I could sift through as I walked the parks and trails. Closer to mum. I wrote and apologised for disconnecting. A simple act of honesty.

I was nervous at our first meeting, but she was as busy and matter of fact as ever, her forward looking mindset warning me not to hammer on the locked door of the past. It was time to accept her life and her decisions. I couldn't change what had happened, or who she was, but I could choose how I related to my past and to her, and that changed me. She never broke her silence or offered why's or reasons. She was who she was, without apology.

Connecting with her through these autumn years revealed that my heart could deftly hold both love and sorrow, kindness and loss, peace, and mystery. I realised that her life was a gift in strange wrapping paper, and rather than reject everything, some good life skills had been acquired: Like roll my sleeves up and get on with it; that no matter how difficult

yesterday was, the fact that I'm here today is what counts; I'm more observant and interested rather than fearful and untrusting; more honest with myself and others, and no secrets! Even the fears and jumbled emotions have taught me resilience. I've learnt that my rigidity and judgement revealed how harsh I could be, not only toward mum (and others), but toward myself. When I reflect upon her life I recognise there were times of fear, anger, depression, and rejection; her choices deeply affected those around her, but she kept going toward what she believed would be a better life.

I love the phrase, 'Most of us are like the rest of us'. It's helped me join humanity knowing I'm not the only one who has experienced sadness, fear, pain, and rejection. I've been enfolded by people with big hearts and open stories, enjoying kindness, laughter, joy, love, and inclusivity.

Mum and I cycled through unpredictable seasons; a barren winter of distrust and fear, an emerging spring as we pushed through the ice and reconnected. Yet it was the harsh desert summer with its fire burning through the dross that gifted us with autumn. A soft time of release, acceptance, and healing.

The scattered children found each other, and mum reluctantly agreed to meet them, providing no questions were asked about her past or her decisions. They flew from overseas and conversations with her were polite and friendly, while elephants tromped around the room. It was timely, happening before Alzheimer's began its plague-like ride through her brain. My mother died with her secrets intact.

How had their lives been affected? Well, that's another five stories.

STRAWBERRIES

by Malana Elizabeth Treulieb

‘Are we doomed?’

I turn my head from the soil in front of me to focus on Celia. Her voice has a haunted lilt to it, her high-pitched tone tainted by fear. I sigh and try to hide the expressions of fear from my own face. My sister is young, but she is not a fool. She can read me just as well as I can read her. Better sometimes.

‘I'm not sure,’ I respond. It's the best answer I can give when I don't want to make myself a liar. Everyone has spent too much time lying to her - promising a future that they stole from her. I do not want to be like them. ‘It's complicated.’

She frowns and shoves her little fingers into the soil I've been working with. ‘Ty says we're doomed.’

Doomed is such a lofty word, filled with vicious promise. It's waiting for a stab in the dark you can hear coming. It is the word constantly echoing in my mind as I complete my empty spells and scavenge our tiny bites. Doomed does not give room for being saved. ‘When did he say that?’

‘Last night. Cause of the flooding in Melbourne.’

‘I don't think you need to think about that. And you know just as well as I do that Ty is an idiot.’ It's too difficult sometimes to look at her when she's like this and so I don't. I direct my gaze at a small potion bottle in front of me, a sparkling dark mixture deep red like blood. ‘Come now,’ I say, trying to change the subject. ‘Help me with these spells.’

She has become more and more inquisitive for the future as time goes on. I used to appreciate her questions once - when I had the answers to them. When she would ask things like 'Why's the sky blue?', I would huddle up beside her and simplify the science of the world for her to understand. That was when she used to play outside in the yard and pick bright red strawberries for us to share as she wondered about the world. Now, she sits in our closed-up shelter and can only dream of the taste of strawberries. I don't like questions that don't have an answer and that seems to be all she wants to ask now.

'I'm too tired for magic,' she complains. Her face is drawn tight as she is huddled beside me, sitting down cross-legged. She is skin and bones and the heat outside is not helping her energy. She leans down in a heap on the ground. I feel like collapsing, too. I don't have the luxury.

Seasons have been drowned out by heat and disaster. Summer in Campbelltown right now is like literal hell, filled with a scorching heat that burns even when we're not in direct sunlight. Our little magic shelter is our haven from the outside, but even though it encases us in four walls and a magical shield, we can still feel the heat. It's been like this for weeks after all.

I miss the cool fresh air of the ocean. I am a Californian at heart, and even though the vicious sea swallowed the state, I think of it as home. But we can't go back.

'I'm hungry,' she says after a few minutes have passed.

'I'll find you something after I try this one last thing,' I say, though I don't know how much there is to feed her. Hunger festers in me too, my body wanting to tremble from the ache of it. It consumes every waking thought. It spreads pain down to my bones, but it is always seeing it in Celia that hurts most. Her hollowed-out cheeks and her skeletal frame cut

into me, but what twists the knife is the constant echoing hope in her eyes. She doesn't believe it is too late. 'Why don't you go get Ty so he can help me with this potion?'

She smiles and runs off quickly to find him. I pour my energy into reading through the spell book again, trying to find a solution in our magical history. Our crops have been failing for years now, and when farming techniques couldn't solve the problems, I turned to the magic I've used since I was a child. I've been altering and completing spells and potions for months now with no success. But I can't stop. Spells come from words, language, and I feel I am desperately stringing together words to save us when there are no existing words to fix this.

The truth is, I want to give in like Ty has. If the world is going to fall to ruin no matter what I try, why even bother? I could just lie down here in the dirt, do my few favourite spells, look up at the stars, and let myself slowly disintegrate like everything else.

But then I think of Celia.

I think of her little bright eyes and their desperation. I think of what it would be to put a real proper meal in front of her. I think of finally giving her food she loves- a steaming flavourful tomato pasta with oozing cheese, a drink of cream and chocolate, and a dessert of chocolate cake, whipped cream, and strawberries. I picture her smile with a full stomach. It is enough to force my legs up and my magic to pour out.

Celia and Ty walk in as I try again. I pour the shimmering potion I've spelled over the cracked soil. After a few moments, a tiny green sprout claws its way through, life pulling out despite the broken land it's growing in, and I stare intently at the growth. Then it crumbles to ash.

Ty simply shakes his head as the last of our hope dies with the sprout. It is a rather empty response for the occasion, but I don't blame him. I didn't believe in it much either.

The Earth is dying and not even magic will save it.

‘Well.’ His voice is low. ‘I guess that’s that.’

Celia looks stricken. ‘Are we doomed?’ she asks again.

I give a burning look into Ty's eyes. I lean down to Celia and ask, ‘Can you let me speak to Ty for a moment?’

Celia sighs and nods. For a child of her age, she enjoys doing as she’s told. Every word I say she trusts and follows as though I’ve put a spell on her. She runs off to go lie down.

Ty must notice me glaring daggers at him because he exclaims, ‘What?’

He's been with us since the beginning. Since our parents died and since I took up magic, he’s been the person to go to. He's always managed to be the rock holding us together, but I feel he is falling apart. I take a better look at him again. He is drawn too, ribs sticking out of his chest, tall and lanky as a skeleton that could crumble. My anger slowly dissipates.

‘You need to be more careful what you say around Celia.’

‘What have I said now? I do keep the swearing to a minimum around her.’ He doesn’t, but that’s the least of my worries at this point.

‘She's been talking about last night. About how you said we were doomed.’

‘Oh.’ He sighs. ‘Is that what that was about?’

‘She's asking about it. She trusts what you say.’

‘Scarlett,’ he says, a careful look in his eyes. ‘You can’t hide the world from her. She is going to know. She deserves to know.’

‘I know,’ I say, the words long and drawn out. It takes effort to pull them out of my throat. ‘I just don’t want her thinking there’s no hope left.’

‘Is there any?’

I don’t have an answer for him, and it floods me with anger. I still want to grab his shoulders and shake them roughly, yelling, ‘*Don’t give up on us!*’. But he already has.

‘Don’t lie to her like they all have. It does no one any good,’ he tells me. He likes to refer to the generations of people before us, those that said we had time before the world would fall apart. Like me, he wants to be seen as far from them as possible.

‘Not all of them were liars.’

‘Well, they got one thing right. They’re dead now like they said,’ Ty says.

Their words always echo inside of me. My grandparents used to murmur them whenever ‘climate change’ so much as came up. They would say, ‘*It doesn’t matter. I’ll be dead by then anyways.*’

‘But we aren’t,’ I say, an angry conviction burning through. ‘Celia isn’t.’

He simply shrugs. ‘We will be soon anyways.’

‘No. This will work,’ I murmur. ‘The magic will work. I will make it work.’

‘And if it does?’ Ty’s pessimism is consuming. ‘What happens then? It’s not enough.’

In the end, he’s right, but I ignore him now. It’s not enough. Even if our magic works to grow real amounts of food once more, the ones in power would simply use it for themselves. The wars going on for the dying resources wouldn’t be easily stopped by some simple food spells. They’re so busy killing each other over what’s left they don’t care to create more.

The real trouble isn't even that the soil here has been sucked of nutrients and qualities that help food grow, but that when food does grow it is destroyed by some other disaster. So, if we can build crops that grow in seconds and can be harvested just like that—well, it may not save the world, but it could damn well save us.

‘Just help me make this work first,’ I say.

Ty reaches over me towards the soil pots in front and the potion bottles behind. He spells the other spell books closer to us with a wave of his hand.

‘I have a theory,’ I say, ‘What if we warp a time spell within the potion?’

‘It’s worth a shot.’

Together we mix our few ingredients and the few strawberry seeds we have left. Growing things before was already a fickle task, but now that it is nearly impossible, it requires perfection in every single action. I pour all my energy into the potion and Ty follows suit. He may have given up himself, but he will not let me down when I need him.

I tense up and decide not to wait to finish the spell. It doesn't matter how long I stay and stare at the potion—it will not make the magic any closer to working. A certain heat bores down on me and sweat brews on my brow. The magic is draining me. I've been without sustenance for so long too that I feel I am about to collapse. I pour the potion over the soil again.

The sprout springs up, slowly pulling through. Celia runs through as it continues to grow, a small strawberry bush springing up. I wait for it to burn. I wait for it to crumble. I wait for the ashes to come.

They don't.

Celia's grin is electrifying and terrifying at the same time. Her hope burns. 'Are we saved?'

'I'm not sure,' I say. My grin is soft and tired, but I don't dare let it dissipate in front of her. 'It's complicated.'

I take her in my arms and do the spell again even as it saps all the rest of my energy, thinking of the bright hope of spring. I feed her the strawberries growing on the bush, red juice spilling on her face as she devours them. I take one too and let the sweet taste flood my mouth till I can think of nothing else.

The Drive

By Cienna Whitton

Ada Thorne stepped out of the air-conditioned uber she took from the airport and onto the lawn of her childhood home. She hauled her large duffel out of the back seat and onto the front porch, the sticky air causing sweat to spring to the back of her neck almost immediately. An Adelaide spring certainly felt hotter than average when one was coming all the way from a New York Fall. She raised a hand to the uber as it disappeared around the curve in the road, when a screeching cry broke her from her reverie.

“Ada!” cried her mother, barrelling through the front door to bundle up her youngest daughter into her arms, regardless of the cusp-of-summer heat. Harriet Thorne was an enigmatic woman, who enjoyed wearing particularly loud prints and had an enormous crush on John Farnham (but would vehemently deny it when questioned on the subject). An English teacher by day, Harriet was known to cut a rug on the weekend with her close circle of friends, hosting the most entertaining barbeques and Sunday dinners around. Ada took in her mother’s appearance; clad in a bright orange and pink leopard caftan and sporting sandals that glittered with diamantes and sequins. She was still wearing the Jo Malone perfume her husband had gifted her five Christmases ago and Ada thought to herself that the combination of citrus and basil would forever suit her sunny disposition.

Before she could respond to the emphatic cry of her name, she found herself immediately passed from one set of arms to another, as her father stooped to pick her up and squeeze her tightly. Oliver Thorne was a tall man who could seem rather imposing, that is until he opened his mouth and out would fall the most soft-spoken words one might have ever heard. A lawyer by trade, Oliver had enjoyed coming home to his daughters and reading them

bedtime stories in the evening and tea parties every Saturday morning when they were little. Ada noted, after much pressing from his wife and daughters, that he had finally shaved his pandemic-induced beard, to her mother's obvious delight.

After many kisses and squeezes that left little spots in her vision, Ada was ushered through the door way of 37 Leabrook Drive. The smell was the first thing she noticed. The somewhat dusty smell that always seemed to cling to the leatherbound books of their home library; the warm lavender scented carpet cleaner her dad had likely run through the house, cleaning before her arrival; the air freshener her mum purchased religiously, that always seemed to go off just as she was passing it. Ada figured she could visit every continent on earth, experience the many spiced and floral and synthetic scents of the world, and always recognise the smell of her childhood home. She quietly, almost reverently moved through the house, noting that it required some cosmetic procedure and that the wallpaper had most definitely gone out of fashion at least fifteen years ago. Seemingly floating through the house, she navigated the odd step up into the hall, until she came to a stop outside her bedroom.

Pushing open the door, she observed that it had been painstakingly cleaned in her absence and yet it somehow remained a shrine to her fourteen-year-old self. The walls were covered floor to ceiling in old boyband posters; beanie-babies lined at least two shelves of her bookcase and her small single bed had been covered in an old hello kitty bedspread. She was certain any decent archaeologist could accurately carbon date the room to late 2013. Ada often wondered why her parents had not repurposed the room, but found herself all the more grateful that they hadn't.

As she laid out on the small bed, trying to keep her heavy eyes open, she recalled the conversation that had led to this somewhat spontaneous homecoming. A regularly-scheduled zoom with her older sister Leah had been just as mundane as every fortnightly catch up until

a blurry looking photo was held up to the webcam. A mass of black and grey and white; a thumb here, a tiny foot there. Leah's sonograph. A baby girl. After the screaming and tears of joy, it was not long before Ada was booking off a month of annual leave to be with her sister for the birth of her first child.

She stifled a yawn. The twenty-two hour-long flight from New York to Sydney and then additional two hour layover to Adelaide was finally catching up to Ada. Over dinner, her mother caught her up on all the changes; who had moved into the neighbourhood, gotten married, had children. Who had moved away, who grew up and who had died. So much had changed.

After helping pack the dishwasher (a new addition), and promising to go get breakfast with her parents the next morning (at this "fabulous new café, just down the road on Forest Avenue, where the deli used to be") Ada laced on her shoes and decided to see where her feet would take her. Heading down Leabrook, to see the sights and hopefully to revisit her younger self.

SPRING

Her first memory of Leabrook was of spring. Being pushed down the street in her stroller as Leah pedalled on her trike ahead of them, her training wheels bouncing on the pavement. She felt the morning air leaving her cheeks rosy, as the sun stretched its fingers out to warm her skin. The strung-out warble of magpies, delivering little worms and crawly things to their babies. The smell of eucalyptus and jasmine after a light drizzle the evening before. Even now Ada could remember it so clearly.

At three years-old Ada's favourite thing was the walk to kindergarten. Calling out sickeningly sweet 'hellos' to every passerby, and shrieking with excitement at any dog

unfortunate enough to be caught in her eyeline. A particularly large Irish Setter was a regular sight on their walks, often stopping to shove his nose in at Ada and snuffle about searching for crumbs of her morning toast, whilst Harriet and the owner exchanged quick good-mornings and how-do-you-do's.

This time of year, was always stunning, and Leabrook Drive did not disappoint. The babbling creek flowed generously, a sanctuary to birds that enjoyed bathing in its calmer bends, a breeding ground for effervescent dragonflies and operatic frogs. Life was simple and as sweet as the cloying jasmine that lingered in the spring air, unmarred by consciousness and self-awareness.

SUMMER

Ada was eight years old when she experienced the first El Niño she would remember, the first of many strength-sapping summers. The long dry afternoons seemed to stretch on forever, cicadas screaming into the post-Christmas heatwave. The drought that year was terrible, heralded by timed showers with tiny hourglasses handed out by strange spokespeople at school; and by dead lawns that would take at least a year of watering to grow back to its verdant green. Leah and Ada's mouths were seemingly always stained with Cottee's cordial, that tasted more like green than lime.

Along Leabrook, the creek bed was dry, caked in dried mud from the previous spring, that was slowly being blown out to reveal the concrete and stone bottom. If she was lucky Ada would occasionally spot a tiny lizard skittering along the bed, chasing flies and other insects, warmed by the scorching sun. The heat seemed to bake any plant life along the road, only the trees and larger brush seemed to retain its colour.

Ada's mother, ever the English teacher, would often bring both girls to the Campbelltown Library over the summer holidays. The sisters, whilst not as interested in books at that time, were grateful for the air-conditioning and the entertaining nature of a new environment. On the third or fourth trip to the library that summer, Harriet dropped the girls in the kids' section before wandering off to find a new Jodi Picoult to bring home. Ada, bored from sitting around doing nothing but using the cold air, began to hunt around for a book to read. She settled on a Roald Dahl, and fell headfirst in love with literature. A love that would sustain her to a career in journalism, half a world away from that little library.

That summer Ada would devour every book she could get her hands on, as voracious a reader as her mother. She read of snowy mountain tops and cool forests of pine, and for the most part, it was enough to stave off the heat.

AUTUMN

Ada loved autumn best of all. While the air had turned cold, the sun still warmed her through while she explored the nature strip with her sister and father. She and Leah took turns throwing 'pooh-sticks' from one bend to another, trying to catch them as they rushed past. Ada dashed down-stream at Leah's behest, as her older sister prepared to throw in another stick. She lay on her belly next to the water, watching it roll past at a semi-leisurely pace, speeding up around protruding rocks and bends in the creek. Various leaves and twigs tumbled past through the water.

As she lay there an unusual mewling noise could occasionally be heard over the sound of the stream, getting closer the longer Ada waited.

"Dad!!" a sharp shout from upstream as Leah called out to their father, "Dad, there's a something in the water!" Almost as soon as the words left her sister's lips, Ada spotted it

rushing past her. A small wriggling ball of wet fur, crying loudly as it struggled to keep afloat. A kitten. Further downstream she could see her dad scanning the creek worriedly, before spotting it floating towards him. He called out to Leah to run back to the house to tell their mum, and to get a towel before scrambling toward the water.

Ada watched her father jump into the creek bed, hurriedly scooping up the tiny mewling creature. Harriet Thorne took the kitten from him as he trudged back to the house, his shoes carrying half the creek with him, and bundled the pathetic looking tabby into a fluffy hand towel. The poor thing had stopped making noise, her mother growing more and more concerned as she aggressively rubbed the kitten's back, trying to force any water out of its tiny body. Heading straight for the kitchen, Harriet continued to massage the creature as she searched the fridge door for the local vet's business card.

For seemingly the longest time, her mother continued to jostle the kitten's limp body, unchanged. Oliver Thorne came bustling into the kitchen wielding her mother's hair dryer, stabbing the plug into the wall socket and aiming the jet stream of hot air at the bundle of fur. Leah was handed the landline and instructed to call the vet for an emergency appointment. As the fur began to dry, Ada could see more clearly the kitten was missing an eye and looked smaller than it should have been. It took a gruelling four-minutes before the kitten let out a loud mewl, and all four of the Thorne's breathed a sigh of relief.

After a week-long vet stay, which seemed to span just about forever for Ada, the little kitten was brought home and named Captain Cat. Leah argued that it was because he looked like a pirate, and Harriet claimed he was named after her favourite Dylan Thomas poem. But they could both agree, it just suited him. The small ginger tabby, grew and grew, and filled the Thorne house with as much mischief and love as all cats do. And Ada thought to herself, that Autumn felt far warmer that year.

WINTER

Ada recalled the cold and damp that hurried in after Autumn every year, seemingly colder and damper than the last. She thought back to the year that Fourth Creek flooded, for days Leabrook Drive had seemed more like a river than a road. Perfect weather for wellies. The creek (that could already get quite full with average winter rainfall) was now an overflowing, roiling snake of water, cutting its way through the man-made channel as fast as it could.

As the waters dropped, Ada and Leah would find little fish that had been swept down from Morialta Park in the large puddles lining the drive and nature strip. After much pleading they spent an entire afternoon scooping up the fish, only as big as their fingernails, into an old bucket and then subsequently poured back into the creek. Ada's father had not been so pleased in this latest wildlife warrior endeavour, complaining of a sore back from bending over and over again, trying to catch the fish as they darted away from his large hands.

With eyes shining, noses running and little hands reddened with cold, the girls managed to safely relocate every fish they could find. And as they settled in front of the heater that evening, Captain Cat stretched over their laps, Leah and Ada recounted the afternoon to their mother and about their best winter so far.

SPRING (again)

Before moving to New York, Ada was certain that the world had to be more exciting than the drive she grew up on. Getting to step into the setting of thousands of films and television shows was at one point the most thrilling aspect of her change in scenery, but then

it was only the route to her office again. She longed for the slow meander of road that followed along the creek, listening to the frogs' trill and the downy frost that settled on well-kept lawns.

She remembered the itchy mosquito bites and the dreamlike sunsets that painted the sky at night. She remembered making up games, and running amok on Horwood Playground until she could barely suck in a breath. She remembered skipping to school, hand in hand with her sister, not even clammy palms could keep them apart. She remembered all the special moments that came with growing up along Leabrook.

And then Ada thought about her soon-to-be niece. She imagined pushing her in a stroller down the drive, greeting people and dogs and birds and dragonflies, and getting to experience Leabrook all over again. She imagined picnics at the playground; of watching her niece get to smell jasmine and almond blossom for the first time; of playing pooh sticks in Fourth Creek. All of the wonders of her childhood being passed down, and all the love they will share because of it.

As she once again meandered home, Ada breathed in deeply and thought to herself, how lucky she had been to grow up on this street. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she spotted 37 Leabrook Drive coming into view around the bend, its porchlight on and waiting for her. Ada Thorne knew in the marrow of her bones; this would always be her home and she would always be a part of it.

What Bloomed in Spring, Dies in Winter

By Isabella Fischetti

The flowers were more beautiful than I'd imagined they'd be and so were your eyes. Darker than the trunks of the trees and stronger than them too. The dandelions waltzed in the lazy spring breeze while your gaze danced over my face, as warm as the sun on the back of my neck.

The rolling hills of Linear Park resembled gentle tides, the concrete path guiding us through the sea of green. We floated forwards, too nervous to let our fingers brush but craving the touch all the same. To occupy your hands you pointed out the trees surrounding us and delved into their history while also revealing your own. You painted me a picture of your past which reflected itself in the shapes of the clouds. A mural in the sky. The story of your life as reflected above was like a book I couldn't put down, but I pried my eyes from it to indulge in you. The spring breeze tickled my nose and startled a sneeze from me, drawing a fit of giggles on my shoulder. Your laughter floated on the wings of magpies as they zipped past us and carried in their song; soft and melodic.

As we rounded a bend you veered from the path, opting instead for one that had been carved out by lovers before us; established by the trodden grass where their feet had trampled. Following its smooth twists and turns led us to a secluded bench, parked on the bank of the flowing river under a spotlight of sun. The leaves grew on the trees like puzzle pieces, fitted together to form a canopy allowing only dribbles of sunlight to pool down below. We found ourselves at the bench, embraced by the warm metal and each other. The water trickled past and our whispers to each other got caught in its current. Spring was breaking in Linear Park, and with it blossomed a love both fresh and true.

The wind laces its fingers through mine in the place where yours should have been. I stuff my hands into the pockets of my jacket, longing to forget how lonely they are. I note that the park is empty at this time of the year. I wonder how long it's been since the grass greeted a human passerby?

I haven't been back here in months. I tell myself it's because the sky has grown grey and I don't like when the chill nibbles at my nose but I know that's not entirely true. I haven't been able to bring myself to come back, not when a place once sprouting with opportunity now mirrors the wasteland in my heart. A graveyard haunted by dead leaves and memories I'd rather forget. I jog the path with my eyes lowered, focusing on placing one foot in front of the other. If I pay attention to the floor, it'll stop me from looking to the sky where the story of your life was once memorialised by swirls and slopes of white cloud. Now when I look above, all I see are angry black splotches on the grey pages of the storybook.

I let momentum carry me up the steep hills, threatening to pull be overboard like rough waves on a turbulent sea until I can't fight it any longer. One moment I'm travelling with a semblance of direction and the next I stand at a corner, overlooking a grassy plain I seem to remember. A winding path with jagged edges branching off of the cement lays concealed under the wild growth of grass. Barely visible but there, nonetheless. I swallow the lump in my throat and let my feet carry me down it, carving out what once was with the weight of my lonesome steps. It drags me around a corner and my sights settle on the deserted bench. I pace towards it and my eyes travel up the tree trunks. The jigsaw is now missing most of its pieces, leaving the bench to collect rainwater and rust. I wipe it down with my sleeve and take a seat. The river flows as it once did, but with a ferocity I haven't seen before. Disguised in the water's roars, I hear shouts of your name. I allow myself to sit for a while and listen to it cry out for you until your name turns back into a mumble of rippling water. Then, I hear something I haven't heard in months.

Underneath the splashes, I pick up the distinct rumble of your voice flowing through the current. In fact, I smell your scent on the breeze that tickles my nose as it dashes by, making me sneeze. Your laugh echoes in the beating flaps of a lonely magpie that whizzes past my ear and your eyes linger on me in the browned leaves squashed under my feet. I can't help but let the tears trickle down my cheeks and splash into my lap. Or maybe that's just the rain? First a drizzle and then it starts to pour. I can't tell where my sadness meets the sky's, but it brings me solace. A faint smile traces my lips. Winter's in full swing and may the rain come and wash away the traces of you trapped within the seasons.

Change isn't Bad - by Chloe Miels

24th of February, 2023

It was hot! Utterly and unquestionably hot. Summer was one thing that Liv dreaded out of all the seasons. It was Wednesday and Liv was at East Marden Primary School, she was a senior, aged 12 and a half, but Liv had never been tall. She didn't like exercise and most of all, CHANGE. That is why Liv didn't like seasons, because they were always changing. Today it was forty two degrees and Liv just couldn't stand it! Her teacher, Mr Beston, was always going on and on about fractions and the classroom wasn't even air conditioned!

The lunch bell finally rang and children stampeded out to the yard. Liv found some shade and ate her lunch all by herself. Since her best friend Hannah had recently moved to Denmark, Liv had been all alone and sometimes she even wished that she could move because it was snowing where Hannah was. After lunch everyone went back inside.

It was finally 3:00 and at 3:01 the bell rang. Liv walked home everyday, even though she lived 10 kilometres away from her rusty old house. Her parents couldn't afford to buy a car. Her family was poor. Liv's dad worked at a phone case making company and her mum stayed home all day. The walk home surprised Liv. Even though it was the hottest day of the year, she felt a nice cool breeze on her face and in her hair. The birds chirped and it seemed like nobody was in a complete hurry! Liv actually began to feel that summer wasn't terrible, it was just the sun trying to do its job and summer saved the family from buying all the warm coats that they couldn't afford. People busking actually made really good music. Without summer flowers wouldn't grow, pools would be too cold for swimming. When Liv came to realise everything important about summer she stopped to think, maybe summer isn't that bad after all.

11th of April, 2023

Liv really did not like autumn. She was in her small backyard with a cheap rake trying to get all the leaves down from the apple tree before her dad set up a campfire. Liv was terrified of autumn and fires since her dad set up a campfire under a tree and a gust of leaves fell onto the fire and started a big bush fire. Liv was too scared to admit her fears, and ever since the fire she felt nervous and scared when it came to autumn. Her mum and dad never really knew she had been horrified by that fire.

Liv's dad came outside with rough looking firewood and he lit the fire. It was a cold night and the fire was small. Too small to get warm by. Dad went into the shed and came out carrying a tank of petrol. As he was pouring the smelly stuff into the fire, his nose began to tickle. AHH...AHHH...AHHHH...AHCHOOOOO! Dad lost his grip and the petrol fell in the fire. The flames burst up. Out of the house went mum screaming and dad and Liv ran out round the side of the house onto the road. Mum called triple 000 and then the wind began to pick up, hurling the leaves in the direction of the fire.

In the morning there was nothing left of the house except the tumbled over rusty metal frame. Liv had new fears about how she was going to buy a new house. And yes, Liv was going to do it.

3rd of May, 2023

Liv decided that she was to raise money by doing jobs around the community. In autumn she decided to rake leaves around the street and even the suburbs. She stuck posters to trees advertising about what she was doing. In the afternoon Liv got a job from her neighbour. She had to rake leaves out on the footpath. There were leaves here, there and everywhere!

After she was finished she had earned \$50. “Thanks a lot,” said Liv, grinning.

21st of July, 2023

Liv was glad that it was finally winter. Not only was it breezy and cold but there were heaps of jobs to go round. First Liv’s teacher asked her to spruce up a dark wooden fence around his home. Second, she helped out at the local football club canteen and, thirdly, she washed an old muddy car. By the time winter was finished Liv had raised \$200. She was so happy.

8th of September, 2023

Spring was finally here! And Liv just hoped she would get enough money by the end of the season. She was right. Liv got plenty of jobs. She planted new flowers in her neighbour’s backyard, she pruned trees across the street, she mowed the lawn in the principal’s front yard and Liv helped out with cutting down dead trees. And just as she hoped, Liv had \$950, just enough to buy a small apartment!

5th of January, 2024

Only the week after Liv had shown her parents the money, the family bought a small but luxurious flat. As Liv walked home from school one day, now only living two kilometres away, she felt a cool breeze on her face and the birds chirped musically. Busker songs were playing and Liv now knew that the changing seasons weren’t there to annoy her, but to help her. If it wasn’t for change then she couldn’t have raised the money she had.

A Sacrifice For Love

by Chloe Staykov

I scrambled up the cliff face as the storm raged around me. I caught a quick glimpse of a figure moving below. A tight knot formed in my gut. It wasn't human, that was clear. Its smooth black fur completely covered the figure's body. The creature moved with distorted movements which sent a shiver down my spine. I thought I was hallucinating but as I continued to climb, it was always lurking in the shadows. Its paws were constantly pounding at the ground, a sound that not only sparked fear in me but distress as well. Its eyes glowed with yellow which pierced through the dark. This creature was clearly dangerous, something I'd never seen. As I reached the top of the cliff, my body pounded in agony and my hands were filled with calluses. My eyelids were heavy, heart pounding and mind thumping. The rain had weakened with time but still poured over me like a parade of tears. I scanned around the area for the creature but it was lost from my sight. I panicked for a moment, realising that it could be anywhere near. I looked left and right, searching for glowing eyes in the distance. Unsuccessful, I backed up towards the castle's face. Suddenly, I felt a pull on my wrist. I spun my head around to see a boy. A handsome boy. His platinum blonde hair was slicked back messily and rain dripped across his forehead. His bright blue eyes shone in the moon-lit sky. The pyjamas he wore, silky and lined with gold. The fabric covered his body effortlessly and the gold touches displayed elegance. I was mesmerised by the sight of him

"What are you doing here?" he asked sternly.

I searched for words. "I-," I stuttered. His eyelids flashed, expecting an answer.

"A creature," I continued, fear tripping over my words. "Black fur, bright yellow eyes an-and it moved strangely,"

"Crap. Get inside," he said, panic piercing through his voice.

The entrance of the castle was a golden coloured gate, carved with intricate symbols representing each season. Each panel told a different story whether it displayed warm

sunshines, elegant flowers, autumn leaves or sparkling snowflakes. The astonishment didn't stop there as when I stepped inside, I found myself in the most breathtaking interior I'd ever seen. There was a throne-like table which carried four crystals. Each crystal had a unique colour with a symbol representing an individual season. The elegant sight rested over my fear softly. The air was filled with the fragrance of a cold winter night. As we ventured deeper into his castle he picked up the pace as if we were in a rush, leaving me dawdling behind. The sunlight escaped through stained glass windows, creating rays of sunshine on the carpeted floor. When we reached a living room area he gestured to me to sit. He sat adjacent to me and sighed, his expression instantaneously showing both concern and power.

"Please, listen to me," he began, his voice urgent. "I know we haven't met before, but you're in danger," he continued, pausing to look up at me. "A danger that is incomprehensible to normals,"

"Normals?" I asked, my voice faint.

Taking a deep breath, he continued, his words flowing with a new type of urgency, an urgency that matched the beat of my heart. "I bear the title of the god of seasons,"

My eyes widened. "God of seasons?" I repeated, my voice barely a whisper.

He nodded. "Yes. But there's a species, a force of darkness, that roams around this world, and can cause indecipherable damage to humans."

Everything started to make sense. The creature that was following me was connected to this boy, this god.

"I believe you've met it, am I correct?" he sighed.

I let out a nod.

"The creature is called a Tenebris," he said, seriousness filling his expression.

I sighed, planting my hand on my forehead.

"Tell me your name"

“Amelia”

“Well Amelia, Tenebri use shadow arts: A form of dark magic which allows them to infect humans with darkness,”

As he continued to explain about Tenbri, my mind swirled with questions and fear. I listened intently as he described the consequences of being infected by their shadow arts. He showed me a book about mythical creatures which described Tenebri in a way I couldn't have imagined.

“Where did you even find a book with so much detail?” I asked.

“There's a library, four towns away. It's called the Campbelltown library,” he replied.

“That simple?”

“Yep”

His voice was steady, but there was something in his eyes that spoke to me. It was as if he was carrying a burden that no one else could see.

“Follow me”

We wandered through dimly lit hallways as my stomach churned with mixed emotions. I was guided into a chamber with stone walls and a blistering smell of metal and steel. We walked down stone stairs, leaving me anticipating what was beneath us. As we reached the bottom of the chamber, I was greeted with rows of serrated blades and swords, each covered with a unique scabbard. I felt a peculiar sensation rush through my body as I looked amongst the vast array of blades. My eyes were drawn to a shadowy corner of the chamber. Amidst the swords, there stood a blade that seemed to defy the essence of light. It possessed an ominous ambience, consuming all light around it. Its presence enigmatic, shrouded in darkness, darkness that whispered my name. Hesitantly, I approached the blade and ran my finger along the glass. I felt the darkness thickening around me like tar, consuming me whole.

“Is this the answer?” I asked hesitantly.

I heard his steps approach me. He placed his hands on my shoulders and leaned over my neck, whispering in my ear.

“It is”

My face flushed red with embarrassment. I had hoped my question would remain unanswered, my vulnerability concealed. But his response only left me feeling exposed and foolish.

“Why are you even helping me?” I asked, my voice trembling with a mix of confusion and desperation. I couldn't understand why he would go out of his way to help someone like me, someone who felt so lost. He smiled softly

“You’re very beautiful, you know,” he started. His words caught me off guard. It was unexpected.

Before any words dared to escape my mouth, he continued.

“We are going to kill that Tenebris if it’s the last thing I do”

“But...when?”

“Now” he replied, his words strong. He looked determined, his eyes filled with unwavering resolve. It gave me a glimmer of meaning in the darkness that had consumed me for so long. He opened the glass case and wielded the blade in his arms. He carried the blade as we walked back up the stairs and back through the dimly lit hallways.

“Stay here, I’m going to change into more appropriate clothes,” he said.

I waited and waited until finally he came back. He was dressed in combat-style armour, finished with black, leather pants. We reentered the entrance of the castle as he approached the four crystals that stood upon their ‘thrones’. He touched each crystal and recited some words in a peculiar language. Immediately, the crystals lit up, gleaming onto his body.

“Wha- what was that?” I questioned.

Beams of light appeared from his palm. Magic.

“I’m a god, remember that”

“Right...”

“Let’s go”

“Wait-” I stuttered.

He slowly turned around to face me.

“I still don’t understand why you’re helping me,”

“I guess we’ll never know,” he smiled. “Come on, before it gets light”

I stumbled out of the castle, following him into the darkness. The night air was cool and filled with a sense of anticipation. As we made our way through the silence, I couldn’t help from feeling frightened. Suddenly, I felt a sensation wash over me. The world started to spin, and my vision blurred. Panic gripped my chest as shadows danced around me, whispering eerie chants that made my skin crawl. I tried to scream, but no sound dared to escape my lips. It felt as if the darkness was engulfing me, pulling me deeper into its clutches. I collapsed to the ground, weakness settling in my body. Bright yellow eyes appeared in the corner of my eye.

“It- it’s here,” I mumbled weakly.

‘Was this the end?’ All this struggle, for nothing. The thought of everything being in vain weighed heavily on my mind. Doubt and despair crept in my mind and I questioned if there was any meaning. Any meaning to any of this. Any meaning to me. The feeling of defeat lingered over me.

“Focus on me” came his reassuring voice. “Don’t let it get to you”

My breaths became hard as a rock, limiting my words.

“N- name,” I whispered. I wasn’t gonna die without knowing his name.

“Xander. Now focus on me,” he repeated.

I focused my eyes on him and attempted to drown the darkness that had consumed my thoughts. But I couldn’t stop eyeing the corner in which yellow eyes stood waiting for me.

Waiting for Xander. As I struggled to regain my composure, a sense of unease crept over me. The eyes got closer and closer, until they were right in front of me, their eerie gaze piercing through the darkness like a pair of twin laser beams, cutting through the night sky. I could feel their malevolence, their hunger for something I couldn't comprehend. Panic surged through my veins. 'I could die at any moment' I thought, my heart pounding in my chest. Desperate for an escape, I made a sudden dash towards the cliff-face. I raced away from those haunting yellow eyes, praying that I would make it out alive. Xander reacted quickly, sprinting after me. His voice echoed through the night. A low, menacing growl escaped the Tenebris's mouth. As I reached the edge of the cliff, my heart felt like a jackhammer in my chest. I turned around, eyes wide as the Tenebris darted towards me, its sharp claws extended. I shut my eyes tightly, brooding my fate. But Xander was faster, his body colliding with the creature mid-air. He struck the blade at the Tenebris but it swiftly dodged the attack. The air crackled with energy as Xander unleashed his power, sending bolts of light shooting towards the Tenebris. The Tenebris howled with agony as the bolts struck it precisely. Xander's hands became a blur of motion as he conjured barriers, protecting him from the attacks of the Tenebris. His attacks were a burst of elemental energy, each strike resonating with an eruption of raw power. With a forcible strike of the shadow blade, Xander sent the Tenebris sprawling backwards. Xander took a deep breath, focusing his energy. Suddenly, he summoned a swirling tornado of light and wind. The tempest engulfed the Tenebris, momentarily disorientating it. All I did was watch. Xander charged forwards, his fists blazed with radiant energy as he delivered blow after blow on the Tenebris. The creature snarled, its dark fur bristling with fury. Xander's body bore the marks of the Tenebris' relentless attacks, his wounds bleeding and armour dented. He breathed heavily, forehead dripping with sweat, legs shaking with fatigue and body quivering in pain. Finally with a closing strike, he

concluded the battle with triumph. The Tenebris shattered into tiny pieces like glass, blowing away with the wind. Xander fell to the ground, panting. I rushed to his side.

“Are you alright?” I questioned.

“Yeah,” he said unconvincingly.

I embraced him tightly, wrapping my arms around him.

“Forget me,” he whispered into my ear. “Forget this ever happened”

I looked into his eyes puzzled.

“When I let go, run,” he whispered.

He let go of me, escaping the embrace. I ran as fast as I could, obeying his words. I forced my eyes back towards him and realised what his words had meant. His arms laid outspread as a different Tenebris attacked him from behind. He had sacrificed his life for mine and although I had just met him, my heart ached with grief. ‘I did this,’ I thought, a tear rolling down my cheek. His body swarmed with a dark aura as I heard his faint voice.

“I love you”

No shillings – Mya Verwey

My head falls forward, dangling in the polluted air. I look down at my bare feet with dust, soot and cuts covering most of them. It's almost silent in here, the jingle of coins is the only thing to be heard. Hundreds of us, hundreds of us in an indirect line, waiting, waiting for our weekly pay. One shilling? Two shillings? No shillings? What will it be this week?

The squeak of the rotting wood makes me cringe as I step up toward Mr. Barnes. Mr. Barnes is the owner of the factories. His few teeth are stained yellow, his beer belly almost snaps his suspenders, and his face looks like he was born grumpy.

"Name" he mumbles.

"Jonah L Clark".

I stumble into the house and shut the creaky door behind me. I look around. Charlie, my older brother, is asleep on my father's big old, upholstered armchair with a pattern so abstract that no one could tell you what it was. He has thick bandages wrapped around both legs from when Mr. Barnes "accidentally" spilled boiling water on his legs. My mother stirs leftovers in a deep rusted pot.

"How was your day?" Mother asked politely.

"Long," I state as I walked straight past her to our shared bedroom.

One week has passed and I'm in this long indirect line once again. The jingle of coins is the only thing to be heard. Hundreds of us, hundreds of us, waiting, waiting for our weekly pay. One shilling? Two shillings? No shillings? What will it be this week? Three little girls in front of me. Hair knotted and dirty, long dresses and cut skin. One of them gets hands over money. "Only 3 pennies, Mr. Barnes!" she complains.

"AND WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT!" Mr. Barnes yells in anger.

"Nothing, nothing at all Mr Barnes" she whimpers in fear.

"Come with me girl," he says while gripping her arm tight and walking away with her, leaving a chipped red tin of money behind. Two more girls in front of me, no Mr. Barnes, one big red tin filled to the brim with money. I suddenly got an idea, an idea that could only happen if I acted on it now. Was it a good idea? Definitely not, was it a bad idea? Definitely. But it was an idea. Everyone stood there quietly. Quickly, I took a big stride to the big tin, shut, and locked it, and ran out. As I ran out, I heard this:

Heart-dropping.

Bone-shattering.

Lung-puncturing voice,

“COME BACK HERE CLARK!”

I gasped as I turn my head to see a big, angry man chasing me at full speed. I start running faster and faster but I’m too weak. My eyes feel like bricks and my legs feel like cooked pasta strands. Eventually, he catches up to me. He lunges towards me, tackling me to the ground. I fall without any resistance. I can feel the wound pounding on my head like a fly that just keeps coming back. He rolls me over. “Gimme that!” he snatches the red tin out of my hand and walks away leaving me lying there all alone for everyone to see. I rest there for a while, not bothered by the raging crowd surrounding me like vultures. Eventually, I sit up. It’s dusk now. I slowly get up to start walking home. I wonder if I will be allowed to go back to work tomorrow. *Or if I even want to.*

Hundreds of us, hundreds of us in an indirect line, waiting, waiting for our weekly pay. One shilling? Two shillings? No shillings? What will it be next week?