

# WRITE ON!

## CAMPBELLTOWN WRITING COMPETITION



# 2022

## WINNERS ANTHOLOGY

### Open Writer (25+ years)

### Youth Writers (15-24 years)

### Junior Writers (7-14 years)

#### First

Therese Gates for  
"Her Tallest Tree"

Supreet Jaiswara for  
"Falling"

Mahya Rabiei for  
"The Tree of History"

#### Second

Bethany Cody for  
"Unearthed"

Hannah Meg Gardner for  
"Ghosts Can't Talk"

Ruby Cartwright for  
"The Memory Tree"

#### Third

Kylie Hall for  
"Suspicion"

Manuri Jayawardhana for  
"The Seven Ages of the  
Tallest Tree"

Lauren Sloan for  
"The Tallest Tree"

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## Her Tallest Tree by Therese Gates

The spade hit hard; the ground resisted. But anger was stronger than either, sharply pushing through again and again until the hole was dug. This barren garden suited the barren heart.

He planted the roses, given for comfort, but painful in execution. Just their names grabbed at his breath – Remember Me, The Children's Rose.

She came to watch, interested, sad, contained. "What about a tree?"

"Why?"

"She liked trees. Remember at the old place, she would scramble around the trees with the boys, hiding, laughing" ... words caught up in the wind as she retreated back to her grey world.

He watered, very still, enclosed, until the words swept back, and he heard the haunting laughter of garden games. He doubled up, his heart throbbed, contracted, and broke, all at once. Then it passed, and as shallow breaths lengthened, he stood again, absorbing the sun into heavy shoulders.

He began to pack up, methodically putting everything away, glad to be busy again before entering a house of more past shadows.

Next morning, they went together, garnering enough energy between them to wander aisles, looking, looking. IT found them. Alive and fresh and young. An eager sapling.

The spade hit the hard earth again. Then carefully, with memories and tears attached, the sapling was tipped out of a known and comfortable place, its roots teased out into a bare space, much like them. They stood and quietly held hands, but within each mind the family movies played, the ones from before ... and now they lived in 'after' land.

Before, life was predictable, routine, known. School, work, home and social life, the ups and downs of this and that, laughter around the dinner table, games to play, homework and jobs to do, friends and family, movies to choose, bedtime routines, weekends to manage and enjoy. It seemed so mundane, ordinary, so taken for granted, yet life and energy had bubbled through it all. Now, the picture was shattered, and life had become defined by 'before' and 'after' – an insidious line reminding them where they had been and where they now lived. This alien place with no manual to help them live through the next five minutes.

He tried to lock himself away, to decompartmentalize himself, mechanical behaviour for work, home, social commitments. But life had now become a rollercoaster ride. All it took to set him off was a song, a photo, the absence, a memory, and he'd be riding down, down, into desolation and despair, tossed and afraid, screaming "I want to get off, I want to die".

Then it would slow, and he could breathe, talk, carry on, but he knew he was only a surface scratch away from the wild ride.

The garden had added to his list of 'things' to do, another compartment needing precious energy. Yet, as he snatched moments to water, tend, and nourish the plants, they nourished him back. The earth slowly tending to his pain as he remembered.

Like the time the wind dropped, and the garden hushed, and his breath caught as his whole being remembered another quietness erupting when they switched off the ventilator – no more breath or life. Only his internal screams of why! - wounding him in frozen moments.

A child had died. An unexpected tragedy. The slashing of life, living, future hopes and dreams. A child who would laugh and smile no more, whose hand could not be held. Whose ashes lay within the dark earth.

And in this small garden he mourned, listening for the voice that now lay in the realms of memory.

The wind whispered, patting him gently as birds joined with sombre song, to comfort his raw and bereft soul.

Stilted talk crept into the home as pain increased through the year, the black hole too wide to reach across as they lost touch with who they had been and couldn't make out who they were, or should be, or would be. The task of dislodging the tangled roots of guilt and despair felt too great.

"How are you?" She asked.

"I don't know, I'm tired and sad."

"Me too."

"Shall we walk tonight?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

She said they had to talk to each other again, had to learn how to live again, to salvage what they could. They slowly learnt to be honest. Slowly they learnt to breathe.

It was awkward as they practiced what to say when people asked, "How are you?"

How to deal with people hurrying away when sighted. How to let others help when they asked. How to be honest with friends who came to walk alongside, who gave care and comfort.

He didn't know how to answer the stilted words uttered by awkward people, their mumbled condolences that time heals, she's in God's care. To him they seemed afraid that death may be contagious, their eyes hinted at it. She was too young for God's sake.

But God had gone, he didn't know where, and he didn't care, not anymore.

In a moment of time an earthquake had swallowed his foundations and beliefs and he didn't know the way forward.

"I'm going for a walk, want to come?" she asked.

"No thanks, got too much to do."

"Maybe tomorrow", she answered

"Maybe"

As he watched the rhythms of nature he experienced his own life rhythms, each day seemed to have all the seasons.

Winter – bare, exposed, unable to hide away.

Spring – warmth edging into his heart, some softer memories, laughter creeping in at unexpected moments, kindness from others.

Summer – moments when he would relax, garden pleasures, the harsh heat of reality.

Autumn – soft, falling away, letting go, allowing change.

One morning he woke late, the blinds were already open and as he sat up, he noticed the tip of the little tree, eagerly waving at him. Aliveness caught his breath. His heart swelled and he laughed. He called her and they sat and watched and remembered with sadness and love.

As the seasons came and went, he planted more roses and shrubs and trees, filling the bare spaces inwardly and outwardly. His hands at one with the soil, he spent more time weeding, watering, tending the plants and tree, and they continued to gently nourish his soul.

He found himself chatting and planning, telling stories that slowly moved from darkness to a softer colour. She came and helped from time to time, and he was glad.

He loved her smile when he picked roses, he smiled back, and his heart warmed.

Each year, the roller coaster slowed a little more, and even though the route would change, the grip of fear and despair was less. He began to see a different view, of life. He'd stopped asking "why?", untangling himself from its desperate grip.

And although this unwanted companion of grief still lingered, he was no longer afraid of the company, having spent long days and months and years together. An understanding had developed, and he had changed. He'd learnt to hold both pain and love and live again.

"Shall we walk?" She asked.

"Yes, let's" he answered.

And so it began, a different path through new terrain. They walked the streets and parks and creeks of Campbelltown. They talked, they listened, always growing closer together.

His hair has greyed, and fingers swollen, his steps are slower now, yet he lovingly tends not only to his garden, but to old and new memories. His family, his wife, his life, his garden.

The fresh morning beckons him, roses tease with new colour, new leaves waving.

Hope appears, for there, hiding behind the tree's new foliage a girl whispers, "I love you".

Her laughter catches on the summer breeze and he smiles.

He remembers every day as he opens the blinds and bids her tree good morning. The tallest tree in the garden. The heart, once broken, mends with love.



# Unearthed

## by Bethany Cody

His dad is back in town. Their modern, two-bedroom house on Sunset Strip has become a war zone – nightly screaming matches, countless pieces of crockery lost to unintelligible anger, shattered against the walls. Their German shepherd Bo joins in the commotion, barking himself hoarse, shredding the wood of their back door trying to scratch his way inside. Anthony is a ghost, passing silently through their home, unnoticed. He takes refuge in the Fourth Creek reserve, a picturesque parkland in the City of Campbelltown where kangaroos roam and koalas leave sweet smelling droppings on the footpaths. He spends his afternoons after school surrounded by the sharp, earthy scent of eucalyptus, the burbling of the shallow creek and kills time by catching and releasing grasshoppers, tadpoles and small, iridescent grey-purple moths, before returning to the chaos.

Today, he lies in the crook of a smooth skinned gum tree, feet propped against the trunk to keep himself from falling. All around is a chorus of sing-song bird calls filling the space between passing cars, the occasional aeroplane and gleeful laughter from small kids running too far ahead of their parents on the walking trail. In the distance, a sharp glint catches his eye. At the bloated, fire blackened base of the tallest gum tree, something shimmers in the fading light. He squints, leaning forward on his precarious perch in the tree.

Beside him, a bird squawks and for a moment he loses his balance, fingers gripping the bark beneath him in reflexive panic. A rainbow lorikeet hops further down the branch until it's so

close. Anthony could reach out and touch its kaleidoscope-coloured feathers. So intimate is this moment that he doesn't expect its sudden lunge and bite. Sharp, throbbing pain envelopes his hand. Strawberry red droplets paint the branch between them as he pulls his hand away.

The bird watches, its head cocked to the side, studying him curiously. Anthony stares back. Eventually, he shuffles down the trunk of the tree and lands on the dirt. The bird peers down inscrutably at Anthony as he jogs away.

It doesn't take him long to find it. The tree towers over the other gums and shrubs in the reserve. It casts a long, dark shadow over the clover-choked ground, dividing the earth in two. The shade is several degrees cooler as he passes through. He cranes his neck to see the top, where the leaves caress the soft underbellies of passing clouds.

In amongst the dirt and weeds, he finds it – a sliver of metal partially unearthed at the base of the tree. He gets closer, nudges it with the toe of his shoe, before getting down on his knees and prying it free. He finds a collar, encrusted with dirt and weathered with age. He rubs his thumb across the metal disc and sees a name engraved in the tarnished silver.

*Smokey.*

There's an address too. It's local. just one street down from his house. He turns the collar around in his hands, weighing it. A breeze raises goosebumps on his arms and he shivers. Somewhere unseen in the tangle of trees, the lorikeet screeches and takes flight.

It's only a three-minute walk. One of the perks of the area is the walkability, the closeness of the shops, schools, libraries, parks, petrol stations – everything nestled in neatly at the base of the Mount Lofty Ranges. You can get far on foot. Hours deep in a forest, sometimes Anthony's mum forgets to pick him up from school, so he treks through the reserve,

following the creek back up through the hills, smattered with houses, until he finds familiar surroundings.



Within minutes, he rounds the corner and finds the house. It's a small place, set back from the road in the dappled shade of a bare jacaranda tree. He knocks on the front door and waits. It takes a moment before an older woman emerges, the front door creaking as it swings open on gritty hinges.

'Hello?'

'Hi,' he pauses, finding his voice. 'I found this in the park.'

She looks down at the ratty, faded collar in his hands for a long while. Eventually she looks back up, her cheeks flushed. She smiles and moves the flyscreen door aside, shuffling out onto the cement porch. Anthony places the collar in her deeply wrinkled palms.

'She was a beautiful wisp of smoke, that cat. Her fur was the colour of fresh coal. Her eyes the colour of glaciers, sparkling in the sun...' The woman pauses, her lips pursed. 'She was only three when it happened.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It wasn't her fault.' Her tone turns bitter. 'That road calls to reckless bloody drivers.' She scowls at traffic passing in the distance, on the main road. Slowly, she turns to Anthony and puts the collar back in his hands. 'You take this back where you found it. It's important she remembers her name.'

He leaves, a little confused.

When he gets home, the house is alive with noise – Bo is barking in the backyard, thunderous music with a droning beat fills the interior, spilling out of the open windows and onto the street. Anthony slinks past his parents in the kitchen, dashing to his bedroom where he locks the door. He leaves the collar on his nightstand, crawling under the covers of his single bed, waiting for the sun to dip below the horizon.

All through the night their voices rage, travelling up and down opposite ends of the house, stalking each other, hungry for the last word. Anthony sleeps in stops and starts as one fight ends and another ignites. He gazes at the collar on his nightstand, how light from the moon illuminates the dull metal, until he falls back asleep. His dreams are filled with a small shadow creature, jumping effortlessly between trees in the park, clawing inside the hollows of trees for a feathery prize inside.

Morning comes with an eerie quiet. Anthony wakes, twisted in his bedsheets. As shadows flicker on his bedroom wall, he decides he wants to hear more about Smokey. He sneaks through the hall to the kitchen and makes it to the threshold of the front door before a voice stops him.

‘Where are you going?’

He freezes, his heartbeat a wild thing in his chest.

‘I asked you a question.’

Anthony turns slowly. ‘Nowhere.’

The sneer on his father’s face deepens, twisting his features. A thin, greasy sheen covers his sallow, stubbly skin.

‘Don’t lie to me, Tony.’

It sits on the tip of his tongue. *Don’t call me that.*

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

It appeases his dad in the moment, so Anthony waits in his bedroom, flinching at each loud crash and bang as his father rearranges the house. Later, with his dad sprawled unconscious across the couch in a drunken stupor, Anthony sneaks through the back door, bypassing Bo to

bury the collar at the base of the gum tree. He plucks native flowers from the earth, sprinkling them over the fresh mound and then calls by the home of the old woman, where they talk about the cat for a long time. He treks back home in darkness.

Nothing happens for a while.

Anthony is alone, more now than he's ever felt. It's only happened once before – no call for dinner from their kitchen. A couple weeks pass, and it happens again. And again. His hunger grows as the days blur into one another, leaving him weak and listless.

Nothing changes.

Nothing happens.

Until one night it does.

Before dawn, he hears it. A harrowing, far-off mewling underneath the clash of gum leaves in a fierce gully breeze.

*Meeeeeeow...*

Beyond his bedroom, all the lights are off. Only the faint buzzing from the fridge can be heard. He creeps by, running his fingertips along the walls to avoid bumping into furniture.

Outside, he braces himself against the wild, wet winds. The streets are scattered with twigs and leaves. Rivulets of water snake along the gutters. The trees in the reserve moan and creak, dancing violently.

Anthony dodges left, escaping the crush of a falling branch. It leaves a sizeable dent in the sodden soil. He stumbles forward but his feet give out from under him, and he falls into the blackened waters of the creek. He rises to the surface, gasping. Claws in his back tear through his shirt to the flesh beneath. He cries out, his voice carrying far in the half-light.

On the bank of the creek, he sees her – a sopping wet, black smudge with a hot pink tongue darting out to lick his blood off of her claws.

‘Smokey?’

The rising sun catches on beads of water still clinging to her fur. She studies him, the tip of her tail flicking left and right. He doesn’t believe it. Rubbing his eyes with balled fists, anger rises in his sunken stomach as he wonders if the old lady lied. But there’s an odd gleam in Smokey’s eyes that soon dissolves his disbelief.

‘*Meeeeow.*’

He drags himself through a tangle of thready, green algae and wrings his shirt and socks out on the bank of the creek. Water trickles down his legs, over the dirt, back to the source.

‘Let’s get you home.’ He extends his hand and for the first time, notices a crescent shaped scab between his thumb and forefinger. ‘C’mon Smokey.’

Her tail stiffens.

‘C’mon.’

She patters slowly closer until Anthony feels the cool touch of her nose against his skin.

The streetlights have blinked out as the sun lazily rises. Anthony waits on the old woman’s porch with Smokey tucked into the crook of his arm, her eyes closed, purring. Eventually the woman comes to the front door. Through tired, squinting eyes she looks down at the black lump in Anthony’s arms. She steps out from the flyscreen and sits on the damp bench chair, patting the vacant space beside her.

‘Thank you.’ Her voice is thick.

‘I don’t understand.’

She shakes her head gently. 'Neither do I, but she's here.'

They sit in silence for a while, watching Smokey snooze.

The woman keeps her eyes trained on the cat. 'It's been very loud at your house, lately.'

He shrugs. His eyes feel prickly and hot.

'It must be very upsetting.' She strokes the rippling fur on the cat's back. 'If you ever need to get away for a bit of quiet, you can come here.'

Anthony's throat tightens and the words get stuck.

'Well... there's a cup of tea waiting for me inside. I better go in.'

He runs trembling fingers through Smokey's fur.

She takes the scene in – this scrawny young boy no older than ten, clinging to her dead-alive cat, scared to go home. After a moment, she says, 'You take her home, then.'

'What?'

'She loves adventure, this one. I'm sure you'll keep her entertained. I'm not as limber as I used to be. Don't want her getting bored and running off.' She scratches beneath Smokey's grey chin. 'Beautiful girl, you be good, now. Anthony needs a friend.'

At home, Bo keeps his distance. He sniffs the air around Smokey, smelling something different, something that raises the hair on his neck.

'It's okay, Bo.'

Warily, Anthony steps closer but the cat leaps from his arms and dashes through the house, out of sight. Bo follows at a distance, whining low in his throat, ears pinned back. Anthony doesn't find Smokey until later that night, where she makes her bed by his blanketed feet.

In time, they form a deep bond through the rough and tumble of home life, finding solace in each other's company. On several occasions, Smokey digs her claws in deep during frenzied attacks against Anthony's dad, until one day, he finally leaves, spotting the floor with blood. From the lounge room window, Anthony watches as his dad tears down the driveway to his rusted, dirty ute and drives off. Smokey cleans her claws beside him, purring.

## Suspicion by Kylie Hall

Kate arrived at the scene and started to talk to the witnesses. She wanted to find out everything she could about the man at the centre of it all, Jason Baker.

She was getting the usual responses from her interviews. The same generic platitudes from people that didn't know him, at least not the real version of him. They were shocked of course; nobody would expect this type of event to occur in their suburb.

His next-door neighbour offered the following statement, "I never would have suspected him to do something like this. He was a regular at my church and the first one to volunteer whenever anyone was in need. I've been to his house and had coffee with him and his wife, Alison. Who knows what was really in that apple cake, I guess I was lucky I was on a diet that week."

The local café owner stated, "I can't believe it was him, not Jason. He was always so polite and friendly. You certainly wouldn't expect this from a double shot soy cappuccino man. Not something this gruesome and messy".

There were more examples like this from everyone Kate spoke to. Most people didn't say anything bad about Jason. If they knew him, they didn't believe he was capable of something like this. Some refrained from speaking as they didn't want to be tarnished by association. Others leapt to wild conspiracy theories. Kate was getting nowhere with the people that wanted to talk to her.

Kate knew the type of person that would be able to help her find the real story, she had been doing this job for over 10 years and always got to the truth. She needed to talk to the silent witnesses, the ones not wanting to come forward.

She spotted him leaning against the wall, wearing muted clothes to blend into the background, watching everything that was happening. He was an older gentleman with a wrinkled face. He



didn't make eye contact and didn't interact with anyone. She could tell he was an observer, a thinker, a man that knew a lot. Most people walked past him without a cursory glance. He was watching them and writing in a notebook. He was invisible to everyone, but not to Kate. This was the man that would help her find the truth. Little did she know how useful he would be.

She approached him carefully not wanting to spook him. She introduced herself and tried to coax some details from him.

His name was John Ambrosini and he was a local Campbelltown man. He grew up in the area back when there were market gardens everywhere. As a child he would talk to the farmers and tried to learn everything he could about how to make things grow.

"You don't make the tallest trees from water alone", said John.

Kate wasn't sure how to take this information, but decided it was her way in. She asked him about farming and growing plants, the soil, nutrients, fertiliser and anything she could think of to keep the conversation going. He slowly opened up to her and shared his knowledge about gardening.

Kate learnt that John had been taking notes from childhood, recording everything that interested him relating to nature. How people cared for their lawns, what they did to the trees, people's favourite flowers, what vegetables his neighbours were growing. Kate had a hunch the contents of the notebook might be useful for her investigation was eager to find out what he had been writing down recently. She asked what he had recorded so far today.

John replied, "temperature, general weather conditions, that type of thing. Mrs Smith cut her roses back early this morning".

This piqued Kate's interest. Had John always recorded specific details about people and their actions? She asked him this question directly.

“Sometimes I do. If it is relevant”, John replied.

He flipped back a few pages in his notebook and read out some of his observations.

“The Indian lady checks her mail at 1:20pm every day and smells the flowers in her letterbox. The short man leaves for work at 7:45am and drives over the edge of his lawn every day. The man with the tallest tree only tends his garden at night, but not on the full moon. The little ones from number 19 run around on the lawn every Saturday.”

Kate could barely contain her enthusiasm. John might have something for her after all. Was it possible that one of the people he had written about was Jason? Was there anything that could help explain the reason for Jason’s unexpected behaviour and what led him to pick up the axe?

She asked about Jason Baker but her excitement was short lived. Unfortunately, it seemed that John didn’t know the names of any of the people he recorded.

Kate needed to find a way to link the characters in John’s notebook to the people they represented. It was her only way to find out if one of them was Jason Baker.

Without a photo of Jason it was hard for Kate to describe him to John. She had only caught a glimpse of him as he was taken away earlier in the morning. He was about six feet tall and had dark brown hair. She knew he was married, to Alison, and had no children. She had discovered that he worked in the city, went to church, but that was all she knew.

None of this helped her.

Kate needed a different tactic. Perhaps if she took John to Jason’s house she’d be able to unlock some of the secrets hiding in the notebook.

John agreed to join Kate on an adventure. It turned out that John and Jason were neighbours. Jason was the man with the tallest tree that tended his garden at night.

A lot had happened in the past three months in the quiet street in Campbelltown and Kate was about to find out the truth.

With a sense of excitement Kate eagerly listened to John provide an almost daily account of the past actions of Jason Baker, the tall tree man.

The night gardening was the strangest. John explained how the tall tree man moved the tall tree from one side of the yard to the other one night. This was at 9:56pm.

He couldn't explain why the tree was so much taller than the others in the yard. It had been planted at the same time as the other trees a few months before. The trees all received the same amount of water, sunlight and fertiliser. He had recorded every detail to the minute. Perhaps the tall tree was getting nutrients from something that had been placed in the soil.

Kate had so many questions going through her head; why Jason was digging in the garden at night? Why did he avoid the full moon? What was in the soil? These questions plagued Kate, but she kept listening not wanting to interrupt.

John continued recounting the daily actions. He had meticulously recorded the dates and times Jason went into the garden. The tall tree man checked the plants 9:44pm, water on at 9:47pm, water off at 10:13pm. He had the daily temperatures, the amount of cloud cover, even the exact time and location the neighbour's dog had left his mark. Everything that happened in the garden was captured.

But last week something strange happened. Jason had been absent and had stopped going into the garden. John noted that the pretty blonde lady had watered the garden at 11:07am.

That was the last action John had recorded.

John mentioned he saw the tall tree man in the garden the other day and he looked very angry, he had screamed and yelled and got in the car and drove off. He hadn't seen him return.

With this information Kate went home. It had been a long day and she had to document everything she had uncovered. She had worked out what happened, she knew what caused Jason to react the way he did.

Kate wrote her story for the local newspaper explaining the horrific events of the previous day, the details leading up to the tragedy and of course the first-hand accounts from those on the scene in the morning.

Jason had travelled to Sydney for work the week prior and he left Alison in charge of tending his vegetable garden. One day she went and watered the garden but forgot to turn the water off, causing the pumpkins and zucchinis to rot and die.

When Jason returned and saw the damage to his crop he was infuriated. He went into a rage and stormed out of the house. Nobody saw him for a few days.

Then on the fateful morning Jason walked into the Community Centre with an axe. There were no cameras, no security and nobody to stop him. He swung the axe and caused destruction. There was flesh everywhere, the floor sticky and slippery.

The first people on scene had described the chaos as something shocking, disturbing and truly heartbreaking.

Jason had destroyed every entrant in the largest vegetable competition leaving nothing intact.

As it turned out, the stress of trying to be a three-time winner had caused Jason to break. He hadn't been able to produce a winning pumpkin this year, nor a back-up zucchini because

Alison had overwatered his crops. Jason was so devastated and he decided that if he couldn't compete then nobody deserved to win this year.

Kate was pleased she'd solved the mystery behind Jason's actions, but she had some unanswered questions yet to solve. Why did he only garden at night? Why did he avoid the full moon? What was in the soil? Why was it that anything Jason placed in the spot where the tall tree was originally planted grew significantly larger than expected?

It was very suspicious behaviour, but more worrying to Kate was that it seemed to be an object of fixation for John Ambrosini. Was John somehow involved?

Her mind was filled with wild conspiracies from werewolves and vampires, to animal sacrifices. The truth would be even more unbelievable and the journey of discovery would change Kate's life forever.

But that was a story for the next edition of the local paper.

## *Falling by Supreet Jaiswara*

Do you remember when we were young and we climbed the trees in the wood? I had jumped out the window in the dead of night, using the darkness as a cloak to hide me. I had run from my home, my footsteps profound in the silence of the night. I had run, run, run to your house, a quiet light emanating from the window. Your dad always stayed up on those nights, watching anything and everything, watching his life waste away.

I waited for you in the dark, standing in the middle of the road. I could taste the excitement of the night.

The names of roads, those paths we took, they swam in my head. *Addison Avenue*, where I first met you, where suddenly stomach acid wasn't strong enough to destroy the butterflies. *Thorndon Park*, where we first saw love, our hands finding a home in each other's embrace, our fingers becoming entwined like the roots of an ancient tree. *Woolworths*, where we frantically bought whatever we could get our hands on, because we had decided to run away together. Of course, we didn't look for practicality, we didn't think of the details. Socks, your favourite chocolate, those crackers I loved with that spicy capsicum dip. We ran through the store, our cart full of the most wonderfully random things, stupid love-drunk smiles on our faces. What a perfectly tragic summer dream, bound to crash.

I waited for you in the dark, and you came.

I watched you as you ran to me.

I felt your warmth, melting my core when you held me in your arms.

*You still down?*

*I am if you are.*

*Let's go then.*

*Let's go.*

We walked through the night. The moon came out to guide us, her shimmering light painting a pathway for us to follow. She wanted us to reach our destination, she was our seasoned guide instructing us in the way to go. The shadows we cast were twisted, long and looming like our expectations. But tonight, we were to be free. We were not to speak of such things.

We reached the edge of the woods, hand in shaking hand, hearts beating in the same rhythm. I felt you inch closer to me, partly because you loved me, partly because you needed to steady yourself. We were scared, by god, we were terrified. We were young, and the world was old and rotten. But, we believed in Her goodness. She was the air we struggled to breathe as we laughed wildly, the earth we walked upon, barefooted, the stream we splashed in in those summer days. And She was the trees. We knew She would protect us, even if everyone else in the world was out for our blood.

Do you remember how we looked at each other as we stood, frozen in front of the looming woods? Our eyes were full of fear, but that didn't suffocate that mischievous glint you always had in your eyes. The baby blue stream in your eyes had become the tumultuous sea, rife with confusion and second thoughts, those *what ifs* we never talked about.

We stepped into the woods, leaving the world behind. The wood was still, so still. We took a few steps in. Our breaths and pounding hearts felt out of place in the silence of the wood, but we knew we were home. I felt the cool earth beneath my feet. Every grain of soil was alive with memories, and they ran through my mind as we tread carefully. We walked on, and as we did, we felt our beating hearts fall into a beautiful rhythm, one complimenting the other. You were the melody, I was the accompaniment.



We scanned the woods, looking for the perfect tree. Your footsteps were in time with mine. We trusted She would guide us, She would help us find the right tree.

And she did.

Do you remember the way our footsteps slowed, at the same time, as we cast our eyes upon it? That magnificent tree, a tower of power. The tallest one of the wood, perhaps. Its branches twisted against the moon, reminding us of the way my wild hair would fly in the wicked wind. We looked at each other, we made a silent agreement.

*This one*, your thoughts had echoed mine. This one would be ours. It would become ours now and forever more, if only we conquered it together.

We ventured close to it, feeling its power emanating, pulling us in, as if it wanted us.

We climbed. Hands and feet, we didn't know where we were putting them. The stillness of the night magnified our breaths, those resounding echoes that I can still recall. We climbed together, you right next to me. I felt your fear, I felt your energy. Every step you took, putting you closer to the top, I felt it too. I felt your heartbeat quicken when you thought you lost your balance, and then I felt you relax as you gained your ground. The tree was kind to us.

We were side by side, but along the way, I fell behind. I wasn't scared, because I knew you. I knew you would wait for me. I watched your beautiful figure ahead of me, moving with such grace and elegance.

Climbing up, high above it all, for the first time, we felt it. We felt what it was like to be free, to be true. Out here, we weren't the freaks of the circus. Out here, we weren't the bearded ladies, the minuscule men, the pig-faced women, put in a glass case to be laughed at and owned. Out here, we were free. We were true. We were the ringmaster of our fates, the master of our lives. We rolled the dice, and we always rolled the seven.

You reached the top before me, and I felt your exhilaration, your joy, your relief.

But, just as I was about to join you, I felt my foot slip. I reached out for you. I called for you, my plea a gasp that the night silenced. I called for you in that moment, sending a prayer from my heart to yours, begging you to hold out your hand and grasp mine.

I trusted you. I knew you would always catch me.

But, I was wrong.

You didn't catch me.

You watched me fall.

You watched me, clawing desperately, my arms and legs thrashing about as I tried to find something, anything I could hold onto to save myself.

But I didn't. And you watched it all unfold.

I didn't feel much from you. All I felt was your heart sinking slightly. And then I felt your awe at seeing the night sky, so clear from up where you were.

I thought I knew you. I thought I could trust you. But you watched me as I fell, fell right from the top of the tallest tree in the woods. And then you turned your head away, and you washed the walls of your mind, painting over my desperation with ignorance.

You deserted me, you forgot about me.

But I? I remembered you. As I fell from the stars, I tried to remember the warm feeling of your heart when it was close to mine. I tried to remember the peace you gave me, so when my body was welcomed by the earth, I could smile. I tried to remember you, because although I felt pain, I loved you more than I could express. You gently traced my scars, you drew stars around them, you painted me a soft golden. And that is what I wanted to remember. That is where I wished to be in my final moments, feeling the gentle hold of your hand on my heart.

I realised, I loved you more than you could ever love me. I gave you everything, I gave you all of my being, and you gave me just a piece of yours, a fraction, just a glimpse into your heart when I gave you everything.

Maybe I was still the circus freak, and you my ringmaster. You decided my fate, and you chose to let me fall. But darling, it's okay. I forgive you. You deserve the world, all of the joy the universe can offer. Perhaps I was ill-fated, perhaps I was never meant to be yours. Perhaps when we were made, we were made tragically, wanting to be one, but our pieces just weren't meant to fit. Perhaps when our souls were brushed with stardust, you were painted with gold, and I with black.

I hope you think about me. Because, although I lie here, covered in a blanket of moss, in a grave of your making, I spend every moment thinking of you. Spare me a thought, darling, because I waste all of mine on you. Forget about that night. Look at the stars, the way they shine bright just for you, and think of me. Listen to the birds, the way their mellifluous songs just seem to follow you, and think of me. Forget about that night. Think of the young me, the one that would laugh at everything you said, the one that would smile whenever you were around. Think of me, in that flowing blue dress I couldn't really walk in, dancing with you under the soft lights. Think of me, my arms around your neck, my head resting on your chest as we swayed back and forth, painting the dance floor with desire.

Think of me, not falling from that tree in the wood, but falling for you. Slowly, deliberately, by choice. Falling for you, and losing myself.

## **Ghosts Can't Talk by Hannah Gardner**

Let me tell you a ghost story.

It starts with a girl walking through Lochiel Park in Campbelltown. She is alone and it is night. The type of night where not even the O-Bahn rushes past or couples are out walking their cavoodles.

It is dead silent.

The girl's name is Mary, it reads so on her name badge which is pinned to a Woolworths uniform. A uniform that is bleeding into the green of the park, until her silhouette is almost gone.

Mary is not gone though. Not yet.

She is still walking.

So is someone else.

A shadowed figure follows Mary down the path, staying behind her at a distance but not straying from the same path. He follows her every step. He is a he because no woman could possess the menacing gait of this man, a solid threatening walk.

He is on a mission.

Mary reaches the road and is about to cross, hopefully to safety, when the man's slow walk breaks into a run.

He grabs her arm before she can step onto the road. She falls back into him, letting out a half scream in surprise rather than fear. Although fear is not far behind in the wave of emotions that is crashing through her.

Mary tries to shrug the man off but he won't let go of her arm.

She turns around to face him and although she was afraid before, terror consumes her now.

"Let go of me Ryder," she gasps.

“Tell me who that other guy is,” Ryder snarls.

“No one.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Mary knows she should fight; she should scream for help until her lungs stop working or she shreds her vocal chords. But she can’t look at him without feeling love, even if it is buried underneath fear.

Mary also knows that if she runs from Ryder he will likely kill her. Fighting him would take all her energy and it may not even be enough.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, letting her body lean into Ryder.

“You should be.” He wraps her in his arms and lets her cry into his chest but he is still holding tightly onto her wrist.

They walk back the way Mary came, hand in hand, almost a picture-perfect couple. All they are missing is cavoodle. The only piece of the picture that is off is that Mary’s arm has a bruise where Ryder forced her to love him.

Their story ends on sad note as I’ve never seen Mary again.

But I’ve seen Ryder.

He walks through the park from time to time but his solid gait is gone. He is not menacing anymore, as he jumps at every bicycle rushing past or siren echoing in the afternoon air. He is frightened although I cannot be sure of what.

Not every hurt can fade like a bruise can, which is good because ghosts can’t talk.

Let me tell you another ghost story.

This one starts with three friends staying at the caravan park on the River Torrens.

Tom and Mitchell are friends from high school, they talk about their old athletic carnivals and how rank Mrs Tate’s breath was. John is a friend of Tom’s from work, they talk

about their old drunken after work escapades and Sharon from accounts bad BO. Each other feels left out in some way because high school and work clash in conversation and none of the men try to find interests in common for all of them.

Instead of talking they begin to cook dinner around an open fire. The fire burns through the kindling quickly but takes its time in devouring a fresh log. Each man is responsible for preparing something for the meal; Tom prepares chopped up vegetables, John prepares the sauce, and Mitchell prepares the meat.

The three friends are about to combine their ingredients together into one large pot, when a stranger joins their circle of camper chairs.

“Gday fellas, I was wondering if you needed some meat for your dinner. I have a bit extra and I am about to head off, can’t take it with me.”

“No thank you,” replies Mitchell politely.

The stranger nods in understanding but asks if one of the friends could help him pack up his trailer. The stranger appears old with wispy grey hair falling into his eyes but he gives the impression of being well built under baggy clothes that seem to be hiding that fact. Tom and John argue that they need to finish preparing the dinner and so Mitchell reluctantly agrees to help the stranger.

He is not gone long when a rancid smell begins to seep into the nostrils of Tom and John. Not even the aroma of the wood-fire and the boiling pot of stew can rid the smell. It stays but Tom and John begin to notice it less and less, like a dream fading when you wake up.

The stranger returns but this time with the meat that the friends had refused. The stranger insist that they take the meat because Mitchell is still busy helping him pack up and will be unlikely to finish preparing his portion of dinner.



Tom and John agree and add the stranger's meat to their stew. Mitchell has not returned by the time Tom and John sit down to eat their meal but they do not take notice. They talk about high school and comment on the strange taste but undeniable tenderness of the stranger's meat.

When Tom and John go to bed they both have a passing thought of Mitchell but they're too exhausted from a hearty meal to find out where he has gone to and assume that he will return to their campsite when he is ready.

Mitchell does not return.

Tom and John spend the rest of the next day on the toilet and they began to suspect that the meat that the stranger provided may not have been the nicest meat in the world after all. They would have asked the stranger what type of meat it was but by now the stranger is gone and only Mitchell would have been able to tell them the truth about who the meat came from but ghosts can't talk.

Let me tell you one last ghost story. This one is the scariest of them all.

It starts without a character but is set in the same park as the other stories. The park is quiet because people do not exist yet. Only the trees exist. Only I exist.

I existed for a long time and then you came along, you people with your machines and your bricks and your concrete. Slowly my world became smaller and smaller, as it was cut and chopped and burnt. I screamed and I screamed and I screamed but no one listened to me.

People came and turned me into a ghost of myself, so it is now only fair that I haunt you like a ghost would. When I brush my leaves on your shoulder or rustle in the darkness, that is my paranormal activity. That is my warning.

Trees listen in the silence, we are watching you live your lives and listening to your secrets and I am the tallest tree with the biggest ears.

All the secrets that should stay buried, may not one day, because ghosts can't talk but trees can.

**The Seven Ages of the Tallest Tree**  
**by Manuri Jayawardhana**

“To be alive. To be alive. An intolerably immense undertaking before which one can only  
gasp in apprehension.”

— Osamu Dazai, *The Setting Sun*

Today is deliberately cruel to me. On days like this, everything seems to smell unpleasant; seems to look unpleasant; seems to have the inkling that if it became unpleasant, I would somehow be able to wave my hand and turn the clock, bringing us back to a time when things were pleasant. I’m no enchanter. I cannot conjure up twittering birds with beady eyes and brilliantly coloured plumages or rabbits with coats of snow from thin air, nor can I summon back those who have already crossed the threshold of the afterlife. I’m only capable of mourning yet another loss.

She died yesterday. I was there, sitting on the windowsill in her room, my back to the evening sky that was a mosaic of dusty yellow, fading orange and splashes of pink softer than her wrinkled grey hands. I have become acquainted with her, perhaps even befriended her, since that day she caught a glimpse of me. This acquaintance is, of course, short-lived, like the few

dozen or so other acquaintances I've had with men of your kind over the years. I'm as old as Death itself and only younger than Time. And on that windowsill yesterday, I saw Time cut her thread from the never-ending tapestry of the universe he was weaving, and Death quietly sing to her as he gathered her frail form into his arms and covered her with the edge of his tattered cloak. I was there, sitting on the windowsill in her room, watching as she left my grasp, with the wind howling behind me, watching as the flowers in her garden bowed their heads weeping. Death carried her across the garden, out of the gate and into the far beyond.

I have nothing much to do today. My feet seem to have decided that paying a visit to the tree is the best course of action to overcome the grief. I can't say that I agree with them, but I let them take me there anyways. I'm not surprised to see the bare branches and the crumbling brown piles of leaves that litter the foot of the tree. I'm saddened but not surprised. In her long final months, she was too weak to make her way up here, and nobody paid much attention to a solitary tree standing in a dark corner of a park. Trees, I think, are quite like you. If not taken care of, if not loved, they wither away.

I sit down in her usual spot. A long branch extends over it, and in the past, glistening green leaves, rich with life, used to form a canopy above her head, as if to shield her from the sun's glaring rays. There are no leaves today, but there is no sun to worry about either. I lean on the trunk and look up at the naked branch.

"I'm here."

“We’ll keep each other company.”

“I miss her too.”

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For the past few days, she had been using a cane to help her climb the little slope to reach her tree. It’s intriguing how the older you grow and the more experienced you become at doing something, the less you’re able to physically do that thing. She was quite agile back then.

Ah, but today – today, it’s different. Perhaps some of her youth’s nimbleness was preserved somewhere deep inside her, slumbering in the dark caverns of her old bones, only to awaken today, and after stretching and rubbing its sleepy eyes, had decided to take her ancient body for a run. Lo and behold, as I watched with my mouth open, quiet fascination dancing in my eyes, I saw her jogging from the other end of the park to the slope, then up the slope and finally, stopping at her usual sitting place. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes were merry and the glistening beads of sweat on her brow were diamond dots. She was panting, but even through the huffing and puffing, I could see the pleased smirk on her face, hear the joy in her breath and feel the life waltzing mirthfully through the bulging veins on her slender arm.

I've heard some of you say that happiness is contagious. If that was the case, at that moment I was blissfully sick with her happiness. Without even thinking, I reached out to her, the life within her calling me, and, in my careless merriment, I let her catch a glimpse of me.

At first she was startled. Huddling into myself, I immediately drew back, trying to put as much distance as I could between her and myself. She saw me. She has seen me.

Then she chuckled.

"Come out, come out- nothing to be shy of. Care to give a lonely old lady some company?"

Saying this, she sat down on a patch of grass under the tree and looked up at the canopy of leaves, some like the emerald jewels on a lost artifact, some like the red tips of a new fire, some like the golden drops that cascade down from the full moon, swinging to and fro in the luscious evening breeze.

"Beautiful." She breathed, and I, peeking from behind the tree trunk, still ruffled by our earlier encounter, had to agree.

"Beautiful indeed."

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It's not often that I see her come here at night. I blend in with the long foreboding shadows cast on the ground by the branches that reach up to the sky in a vain attempt to catch the silver crescent moon that's taking cover behind the veils of dust grey clouds. Her walk is brisk, eyes furious, chin lifted in indignation. She is clutching the crumpled remains of what appears to have been a leaflet in her hands. As she nears the tree, I can hear her muttering to herself; words spat at no one, words spat out to the oblivion to ease her anger.

She is under the tree now, first walking this way, then walking that, her hands waving in the air as she continues her monologue. Something about 'nosey buffoons who have no self-respect' and 'fools who can't agree on anything'. This isn't the first time I've been the unwitting audience for a speech of this sort. Whatever meeting she attended tonight to organise whatever event that would be happening in a fortnight must not have gone well.

I'm not too worried about the ones on the receiving end of her fury though. On the contrary, I'm worried about her. The remnants of the leaflet in her hands read 'AM ELLT WN LRA Y', which I take as talking about the Campbelltown Public Library, the usual meeting place for the organisers of these events. It's quite a long way from here, and it's getting later with every minute she decides to stay here to express her frustration further. It's the middle of the night, and, owing to the moon playing hide-and-seek with the sky, it's quite dark today.

I feel agitation rising in my chest as I watch her lean on the trunk of the tree. I want her to go home. She shouldn't be here at this hour.

She sits down, huffing.

Fine.

I crouch down next to her.

If she's not leaving, I'm not leaving her side either.

"This girl", I think as she looks up at the faint beams of moonlight that filter through the tangled branches above her. "I don't know what to do with this one."

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She is too stunned to speak, still stuck in her state of shock by the news she got this morning. Her tired, puffy eyes stare at nothing, searching through the folds in the fabric of time for someone I cannot see. Tear tracks cascade down her ashen face and off her downturned chin like a waterfall that crawls blithely over the flat ground before hurling itself off the cliff into the crystal pool below. Occasionally, muffled sobs escape her chapped lips, and she brings her hand to her mouth to control herself. The waterfall flows more freely.



I feel wretched, miserable, desolate. I want to comfort her, hold her in my arms as she sobs to her heart's content, wrap her in my warmth and protect her. But I cannot. I should not. Besides, at despairing times like these, I'm what your kind loathes the most, assigns fault to the most. I don't blame you.

The ink sprawls on the open letter in her lap mock me. The silver glare of the half-hidden medal she's clutching in her hand like a lifeline blinds me.

I look up at the branches that are half hidden by a white shroud of mist. This is her sanctuary. This can comfort her; protect her. I don't belong here. Not now. It would be best for me to leave.

But before I turn and go, I place a soft kiss on her forehead.

I'll be back. That's the least I can do.

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She's too engrossed in the book in her hand to notice him immediately. He stands a few feet away from the tree, looking at her as if trying to commit every little detail about the way her brows furrowed together when she reads or how the stray strands of her silky hair swung joyously in the sweet summer breeze to memory. A single ruby red flower lay on his right

palm, and in the very centre was a small cluster of golden droplets huddled together like the brisk marketgoers that crowd around storefronts on the weekend mornings.

Snapping out of his trance, he calls her name, and when she turns, he waves his hand, imitating the desperation of a young child who desires to catch an ice-cream truck that has already sped past him. She smiles at him brilliantly - a smile that rivals a thousand splendid suns - and beckons him over to the tree. He gladly obeys.

I've gotten used to this painfully haphazard routine of theirs - the unannounced arrivals, the incessant daydreaming on his part, the feigned indifference and the concealed racing heart on her part. Once or twice every week he visits her at the tree, and they sit beneath the cool shade of the plump leaves in silence; a silence so heavily pregnant with things both parties wish to say but cannot summon the courage to voice; a silence that is so unbearably uncomfortable for their unknown and unwilling accomplice - myself. I cannot recall another time I wished more fervently for the power to draw a conversation out of two parties that so awkwardly scuttled around each other, unable to express their tender feelings. Alas, I'm nothing but a mere invisible spectator in this excruciatingly slow debacle, and the only thing I could do was curse their naivety.

No alteration to the routine today either. I watch, wincing, as he cracks a toothy smile at her and hands her the camellia blossom before sitting in his designated spot beside her. She grins at him and goes back to her book.

I sigh.

There's nothing more ungainly in this world than first love, and the leaves shielding them from the cheerful light of the evening sun rustle in the wind as if in agreement with my thoughts.

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The boy and the girl race up the slope leading to the sturdy tree where their fathers laboured the entire morning to set up a wood and rope swing for them to play with, the cropped hair on their miniature heads swaying back and forth, their little shoulders bobbing up and down and their tiny feet thumping the ground in regular intervals, sending puffs of dust and sand up in the air. Gleeful laughter bubbles forth from them, pointing to the plank suspended from a low-hanging branch, they shriek in delight. The life on their sunflower faces lights my heart up with joy.

She decides to go on the swing first. Stumbling and giggling, she crawls on top of the plank and grabs the two ropes on either side of the seat, her chubby pink fingers curling around them, grasping them tightly. Her stubby little legs hang over the edge of the plank, feet bare and toes brown with dirt. Eager to push this swing the same way his father pushes the swings he used to play on at the park, the boy positions himself behind the swing, and shoves it with all the might he can muster.

The swing creaks and rocks forwards and then back. They both yell in delight, and she asks him to do it again, and this time, she says, make the swing go faster.

Around them, the balmy January breeze whispers stories about the happenings of once upon a time in faraway lands, and the luscious green blades of grass and the cotton-ball dandelions perk up their ears to listen to the wind's tales. The children laugh again, and the tender lemon-cloured leaves on the branch the swing is tied to laugh in unison.

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I'm everyone. I'm everything. I'm everywhere. When you look up at the stars at night through the windows you left open to let the cool air in and make a wish, I'm what you wish for. When, after a long and tiring day, you put your head on a loved one's shoulder and cry, letting their warmth embrace you and soothe your aching heart, I'm what you cry for. When desperation takes hold of you and you grovel at the foot of impassive statues inside hollow silver temples, praying for a miracle, I'm what you pray to. When, out of the kindness and the grace in your heart, you help your brethren, I'm what you help.

And on that day, when a lean young man with careworn eyes and a veil of sweat covering his brow came to find sanctuary under the tallest tree he could find on that strip of land dotted with shrubs and bushes and nothing more, he asked me to grant him something.

“Life”, he said. “Life, let her journey be devoid of storms and waves, and let her arrive on the other side only long after she has set sail.”

His daughter, a mere infant, cozied up in her father’s arms, looked at me and smiled, the dimples on her rosy cheeks like dents made in a pot of fresh cream, eyes eager to see what’s to come, her whole life ahead of her.

I smiled back.

I knew that I could not guarantee anything, for I haven’t the power to predict what’s yet to happen, but I also knew that I would stay with her until we crossed the sea.

The Tree of History  
by Mahya Rabiei

Slow gentle waves of wind streamed through the clear blue sky, blowing my auburn hair delicately across my face. I clutched my knees tighter, suffocating myself in a closure of sadness, anger and isolation. Heavy droplets of tears rolled down my freckled cheeks, leaving damp, drooping lines reaching from my welled eyes to my quivering chin. My back ached against the solid hazel brown trunk of the tree behind me as a complex question lingered in my head. *Why me? Why?* I thought back to the day it all happened. The day I woke to bitter shouts throughout the house, the day I heard suitcases packing and objects being thrown about, the day my parents' room became only my mum's, the day...I shook my head. It was too painful to think about, and there was no point in crying.

Shaking the dust off my knees, I got up to leave. Suddenly... I stopped. I felt something. A miniscule indent, pushing against my spine, beckoning, signalling me to turn. Curiosity took me over as my head spun, searching for the phenomenon that called to me. I saw it, as small as a grain of sand, hardly visible, but still there. Four microscopic letters, etched into the lower left hand of the trunk. *C.J.F.C.* I reached for them carefully, time frozen around me. My fingers traced them, feeling the smooth grooves, the detail, the enchantment. My mind spiralled, imagining, wondering...

I saw pale figures, chasing, shooting whom seemed to be Indigenous people as they fled away with worry. I saw children, hopeless, scared, clutching their mothers' hands with tears streaming down their faces, hoping for the better. I saw more men, clearing the land and building grand houses, not once caring for the aborigines' huts and homes. Spears broken, children taken away, the scenes all flashed before my eyes. Colours swirled, moments moved, memories came alive. Then suddenly... I broke free. I snatched my hand back as if it had been

burnt. I looked around, expecting to see dust and dirt, but all I saw was the colossal gum before me, unmoved.

My body started to back away, trying to escape before it was too late. My knees shook in fear as I willed my legs to run. It was then that I caught a glimpse of something. Something small, tiny, almost... microscopic. I stopped, dead in my tracks, wondering. *Could it be?... A force pulled me closer. I took a step forward. Then another. And another, until I was back, back at the bottom of the mysterious eucalypt.*

Bending down, my eyes started searching, scanning. There it was. Identical to the ones I had seen before, three tiny letters lay on the ragged bark before me. *L.G.R.* Every inch of me said to run, to get away and to forget I ever saw this. Every part of me wanted to erase this moment from memory and to go back home, but the initials reeled me in closer. I tried to resist, but the force was too immense. It sucked me in, slowly but surely, until I was centimetres away from the tree. My hand gradually lifted, extending towards the initials against my will. I squeezed my eyes shut, straining to haul back, but it was too late. I felt my fingertips brushing against the marks, feeling all there was to be felt. My eyes snapped open in horror and shock, just as my vision started to blur. My head felt woozy, my mind spun repeatedly, and then, I started to see...

I saw foreigners, Italian men, setting up stalls and markets, draining their hard work into everything they did. I saw them with hope pasted on their expressions, hope of gaining new homes and families. Pale faces surrounded them, gazing at the newcomers suspiciously. I saw them helping, proving to the community that they were just as trustworthy as them. They grew new plants people had never heard of, they baked delicious feasts galore, from risotto and lasagne to pizza and ravioli. They made new families, built new homes, grew into the society. Their lives grew stronger and stronger. Bit by bit. Step by step. Children laughing gleefully,

smells of boiling pasta filled the air, farmers growing and caring for their gardens, the scenes once again filled my eyes. History surrounded me like a bellowing hurricane. My vision blurred as shades of grey and brown flew around me, and then... I pulled away.

Panting heavily, I struggled for air. My eyes bore into the trunk, wondering. Something deep inside of me kicked in. My hands reached around the tree, searching for more. I needed to see what else there was, what other moments were captured, what history this spectacle held. All of a sudden, my fingers froze. My arm started moving all on its own, reaching around the back of the trunk, then it stopped. I tugged my hand back in pure shock, eyes widening at what stood before me. Thousands and thousands of initials, all carved within the tree. Some in clusters, others spread around. Some had small illustrations next to them, illustration of families, hopes and memories. I stared in awe until couldn't resist anymore. I rose in excitement and delight, running my hands along every letter I could see. I snapped my eyes shut and waited, until...

Blinding flashes of light shone everywhere. Flamboyant shades of colour drenched my view. Scenes, moments, memories, they all spiralled around me. The migrants who came in, the people who formed the council, the schools that were build, the streets, the stores, the homes. The parks that were formed, the families that grew, the community that rose up to every challenge. More and more visions appeared, more and more lives I witnessed. They kept coming, one on top of the other, rushing into the trance that I was in. I didn't want it to end, not now, not ever. Then suddenly... I was back. Back in reality, standing where I had stood before.

It was then I realised, that this was more than just a tree, more than just a plant standing tall in the ground. It was a world of memory, of moments, of history. The history of Campbelltown. It showed good times, bad times, times when people really lost hope, times when they stood strong. This tree had experienced it all, from when it got its first scar to now, were it was filled



with millions. An idea struck me. My dark chestnut eyes scanned the ground beside me and my fingers grasped the nearest stick I could see. I stood up and carefully, right in the middle of the trunk, I added my own mark. *H.E.W.* Hazel Elowen Woods. Maybe this way, someone else could see what I saw, and could add their own. Satisfied, I dropped the stick and strolled away from the tree. The tree of history...

## **The Memory Tree by Ruby Cartwright**

In the dreaming I was born. I began a small seed slowly growing my roots deep into the ground. My trunk began to spiral and twist upwards into the illuminated night sky, I looked around me and saw faces... two curious faces. I watched their love grow. The smiles they wore, the sound of laughter they made, their embrace grew stronger by the second. As their love continued, I grew as well, my leaves fast capturing each moment the two shared. Their dark faces reflected in the starry kudlilla sky as the night grew old with them. It wasn't only their embrace I captured. I caught the memories of historic events too. Days soon passed as I stood there still, listening to the sounds around me, the birds calling and the talking in the crowd down below. But then the sounds changed. Unfamiliar faces came into view and a different language was being spoken. Everything changed. Huts turned to houses, campfires turned to lanterns, as I watched more of my leaves blossom, catching the moment when history began to write new chapter...when history told the story of Campbelltown.

I stood and stared. My light curls blew in the calm wind along with my white, floral dress. What I was witnessing was the most phenomenal tree in all of the land. Its branches were populated with leaves galore, its smooth brown trunk towering over me. I reached up, to touch one singular green leaf, on the smallest of branches, and then... everything went dark. A small light soon appeared revealing an immense blazing campfire with groups of people surrounding it beneath the dark night sky. They were speaking a language I didn't know. Children dancing around the fire, families clapping along to the rhythm of the wirri. Laughter and joy filled the air. Darkness once more surrounded me, and I was where I began. *What was that? What was I hearing? What was I seeing? Who was I watching?* My head filled to the brim with questions. *What was this tree capable of showing me?* I thought... if it can hold different memories of different people would one be based around me? I once again reached up to another leaf...

A constellation of memories filled my surroundings as a small and gentle hand reached up to touch one of my leaves. I could see the dreaming again of when I was born. I was lost in the memories of before. But now a young girl with golden curls and a floral winter dress was creating a stretching pain in one of my branches, she was trying to reach upon more leaves higher up but at the same time was pulling on a weak branch of mine to do so...

Once again, I stood and stared. This time only to question myself with: what have I done? I knelt down, examining the dark and rigid branch of what used to be part of the tree. Part of history. Part of Campbelltown. It now lay defencelessly in my hands, leaves wilting and turning to dust. Bird chirps filled the air as the harsh wind howled in sorrow. The scar of where the branch once was acted like an infectious disease. The tree's trunk started to turn grey, all life rushing out of it. The wind picked up the dust, spiralling it around like a hurricane of memories. Of moments in time. I needed to make amends, fast. But how?

My body started to ache. My leaves began to droop. All life was draining out of me. More leaves of mine began to wilt, fade, falling and gliding on a thin and cold winter gale. Soon enough I was down to my final leaf. The leaf that held the memory of the dreaming. The leaf that started this history. The leaf that made me who I am...

An agonising sting pulsed through my veins as I watched in horror. The last leaf fell from the tree, swaying in the breeze. I ran and reached out to grab hold of it, just as it began to turn to ashes. My quivering hands clasped around the remaining leaf particles, gathering them in. I pulled my hand close to my chest as I slowly snuck a peek. The cinders started to whirl, to move. A voice. Faint delicate words. It echoes in my ears. 'My time is up and that is just my

fate, but your time is not over yet. Rebuild what you have seen, spread the word, start a new chapter in history. I will stand to be a memory of the past as you go on and thrive.'

I watched her walk away with a worried look on her face, and I knew she had heard my message. My heart ached. My trunk dried. My branches lay lifeless. I knew it was the end. I took one last look at the world before me, the world full of stories past, present and future. My life began to close as I received one last gift. A leaf that showed a new beginning. A leaf that captured my ending...

As I walked nearer and nearer to town with trembling legs, I couldn't resist but to look back one last time. I saw the motionless tree that once told the stories of our world. But this time when I saw it something was different. There was something new. I changed my route and headed straight for the tree... I must be mistaken, I'm sure, it just can't be true. There was a new leaf. I reached up to prick it off, but then I stopped. Because the picture engraved on the leaf was the moment the tree had died. The moment it lost hope. The moment I was chosen to continue history. The tree needed this leaf. This leaf that would show its last memory. Once more I turned around and left for town... This will not be the end. I will continue the stories, I will pursue the story of Campbelltown and so will the people who call it home. I will make sure that our community will blossom with leaves bright and gentle if it's the last thing I do... When ones alone we can create and achieve so little but when we are together we can create and achieve so much.

## **The Tallest Tree by Lauren Sloan**

As I look around, I know I want this to be my forever home, - I want to spread my roots here. I look more closely now, knowing that I will stay here for many a year. I see the trickling Torrens River run past, its water going over stones and reeds, the strong gumtrees that have lived through many wild storms, and the faint laughter of families running around in grass patches, and swimming in the cool waters, all surrounded by a luscious green grass. I spot a flour mill only about 20 meters away and see a young girl running around and playing in the bushes, her mother calls her name, - Kayla. I will let myself grow and let myself appreciate such a glorious place and way of living.

Many months go by, and I adapt to this community, feeling myself go from shy and small when I arrived, to now feeling free as a bird, flying over the town. I watch families grow, and friends rejoice. Kayla and her family live in a small, brick cottage next to the mill and her dad runs it to make flour. I am glad that I chose to stay here. I love being part of this community.

I have now been living here for a year and in this time of season, all the blossoms from the fruit orchards are blossoming with vibrant pinks and whites, with newly sprouted fruits of all kinds popping up and out of the woody branches, soon to be picked and sold at the markets for children to eat, juice dripping down their faces as they enjoy their sweet, sticky fruit.

More years go by, and I have grown to be big and tall. A new swimming pool has been made by the river's edge, I live close to the pool, so I can always hear the happy talk of citizens basking in the radiant beams of sun, splashing in the nippy waters. With the pools' new arrival, swimming in the river has been banned, it is claimed to be dangerous. I usually see Kayla swimming in the pool, she is a very good swimmer, always playing with her friends and family, or helping little ones to learn to swim. An afternoon at the pool is always a lot of fun.

Many years pass, and I watch the world go by from my home by the river, Kayla has grown up and her family have moved out of the flour mill as it is old and falling apart. Her family are living further away, but Kayla still rides her bike back to the river every day, visiting me and her childhood home. She is 61 years old now, and I realise that I have been here for a very long time too.

Another winter season comes, and clouds come rolling in, small and fluffy at first, but quickly growing into huge grey monsters, blackening the sky. The rain never seems to slow, there are more storms and clouds than there ever have been for all my time here. Rainstorms turn into floods, and the Torrens has overflowed with murky brown water. Just as I think the storms can't get worse, the rain stops, the clouds are still lingering and full, but the rain has ceased. No-one has emerged from their home, as they think that it will bucket down any minute. I am looking out at the wet, deserted landscape when I see a single figure riding a bike down a large hill - Kayla. She is speeding down to the riverbed, feet pedaling faster and faster stopping just twenty meters away from where I am. As she approaches the river, she pushes her bike out of the way and

kneels in the overturned mud. She had only just started to dig around for something when a colossal wall of water came powering down the river from nowhere and the rain pelted down on her. I knew immediately that the flash flood will scoop Kayla away in the blink of an eye. She tries to stand and run, but the water grabs her and washes her flailing body in my direction. Though she can swim, the water is too strong for her aging body, and she is left helpless. As the water comes churning in my directions Kayla is screaming, the flood is too strong for her. She comes closer and closer in a matter of seconds; then a miracle happens, she uses all her might to grab my outstretched arm as she washes past me. I thought she missed me until I feel her hands grip onto my arm. She hangs there, her face covered in mud for a while until the flood slows down. After what felt like hours, the flood seems to slow and Kayls swings down from my arm. She is about to leave when I hear a gasp of surprise from her,

“My bracelet!” She speaks. “that’s what I was looking for when I came down here! I thought I lost it, I wore it all the time when I was a child!”

I then noticed a small golden chain with gemstones of every color in every tiny golden hoop on the bracelet, it was lovely, and it was hanging on my arm! Kayla took it with happiness all over her face.

“Thank you.” She whispers and she hugs the woody branch that saved her. She then rides away with a look of hope on her face as she knows she is safe.

You are probably thinking, woody branches, swinging from my arms? Well, I am no ordinary human, in fact I am not a human at all, I am a tree, the tallest tree and I live in the Campbelltown area answering the whispers of the wind and watching over the people and animals that also call this place home. As for Kayla, every day she comes down and sits in my branches- wearing her

bracelet that was washed up by the tide in the flood which made its way onto my branch, - and thanks me for saving her life in a time of need.

The End