CAMPBELLTOWN

WRITERS' COMPETITION



2026
WINNERS ANTHOLOGY

	Open Writer (25+ years)	Youth Writers (15-24 years)	Junior Writers (7-14 years)
First	'The threads we don't see' by Shraddha Iyer	'How to Perfect the Human Race' by Su Nguyen	'The Boy and the Duck' by Callum Harmer
Runners Up	'Dewey Eyes' by James Myhill	'Timeless Connection' by Rachel Trudy Diprose	'The Changing Island' by Kayla Farnham
	'Pane Della vita - Bread of Life' by Janine Fitzhenry	'I'm Glad You Called' by Naisha Raj	'Two Windows and Two Lamps' by Chloe Staykov

WRITERS SA

CAMPBELLTOWN
CITY COUNCIL

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Open Category (25 years old and older)

Winner - *The Threads We Don't See* by Shraddha Iyer

I noticed the spider webs when I was planting the jasmine cuttings my neighbour gave me. Delicate silver lines strung between the downpipe and a bracket, catching the low autumn light.

It was April. I had been in Adelaide long enough to know which bin went out on which week but not long enough to stop translating dollars into Indian rupees in my head before I paid for anything. On my fifth day here, I met my neighbour. Initially I was so afraid of talking to them in case they heard my accent and thought I was not worthy enough to be nice to. I had to mentally check myself and correct my way of thinking. If I thought that way then I am only doing others a service. *You are worthy of everything, no matter where you come from.* I always had a good relationship with my neighbours back in Chennai and I realised how important it was for me to try and build that in Adelaide too. My anxiety washed over me when their first question was 'Would you like a few jasmine clippings?' and not 'Where are you from?' Needless to say, we alternate having dinners every other Friday night at each other's places, learning about different cuisines and each other's cultures. It never felt the same as before though.

The spider came out of its den. A solitary creature. It was black, compact and unremarkable; that is until someone tells you otherwise. I knew the dangers of moving to the land 'down under' before I moved here. My friends made it a point to scare me enough to make me want to stay back in Chennai. The thought was both adorable and offensive at the same time.

I kneeled down further to take a closer look at the hideous thing. A woman at the servo on Montacute road warned me about them within a fortnight of arriving; 'Black house spider, love, not the funnel-web, but still, mind your washing…'. I was on my way back from the Campbelltown library, the place I called my second home since I got free wifi and the company of an enormous collection of excellent books.

I should have knocked the web down. Everyone said so but I kept pushing it away as a task that did not require my priority when in fact I was both terrified and drawn to the creature at the same time. It was also free pest-control.

In Chennai, my grandmother used to say that the *ottadai* — the cobwebs — in the corner of the kitchen ceiling was good luck, so long as you left the spider alone to eat what it caught. Granted she was 75 and had a weak knee so she never could clean that high but she said that the spider had its work; you had yours. You did not interrupt another creature's labour just because you found it inconvenient. I thought of her often that first year, mostly at three in the morning, when the jet lag had long since worn off but something else kept me awake instead. Call it dislocation or grief but nobody here seemed to have the right word for it.

I started to go out to the back step in the cold and watch the web catch what light there was from my neighbour's sensor lamp, and I would think about how my grandmother's spider and this one were, taxonomically speaking, almost certainly unrelated, and yet I felt more kinship with the black house spider in my backyard than I did with most of the people I'd met since landing in Adelaide.

That is a strange thing to admit. I am admitting it anyway.

By May the web had thickened into something structural; not the wheel-shaped lace you see in picture books, but a messy, functional tangle, corner to corner, the kind that looks abandoned until you watch it long enough to see it isn't. The webs connect with each other and they all connect back to the spider, making a whole feedback loop. It was like a human brain without all the protective layers and yet this web did not need those security blankets. I started to feel a little better knowing weirdly I was not alone on my journey of life. Me and the spider were both solitary creatures living together. There was something beautiful in that.

I hadn't known spiders moulted. I looked it up on my laptop. *Ecdysis*, the article called it. The shedding of the exoskeleton so the animal inside can grow. I thought the spider had died and a part of me did too but apparently the old shell keeps the exact shape of the creature that wore it — legs, joints, the ridge of the back — right up until you touch it, and then it's nothing. Air and memory.

I felt like that shell. I had left a part of me behind in Chennai — a job, a language I didn't have to translate, family who could see me on a Sunday without eleven hours and a screen between us — and for months I had walked around the ground at Morialta reserve feeling like a hollow version of myself, going through the motions of a life but whatever was actually growing did it out of sight, in the cracks, unglamorous and slow.

Nobody notices when you start moulting. When they do, it's already happened and you have grown out of your skin. You leave the old life behind.

The article said that the black house spider is almost never aggressive, that it wants nothing from you but to be left in its dark corner, that it will retreat from your shadow every single time and still, an hour later, be back at its work as if the interruption meant nothing at all. I thought that is the most immigrant thing I have ever heard.

I saw on the community noticeboard, later on one day, a South Indian families' catch-up that met once a month at the hall near Newton, which is how I met Meena, who is from Kerala and married to a Malaysian-Chinese man and has, between the two of them, a household that runs on four languages and one shared understanding of what it costs to build a life from scratch in a place that mostly doesn't notice you're doing it.

As an immigrant, you flinch and go quiet when someone's shadow falls over you; a landlord's raised eyebrow at your name, a colleague's slow, over-enunciated English, a stranger's *no, but where are you REALLY from*. And then, because the work does not stop needing to be done, you come back out and you keep building. Nobody is watching closely enough to notice how much you've built, or how many times you've had to start the same corner of web over after someone's broom found it but it is structure, and it was made by something far more patient than the people walking past it ever gave it credit for.

By September the web had survived two storms, and the attention of a magpie that gave up after one failed attempt. I watched her (I had started calling the spider "her," with no evidence beyond a feeling) take a blowfly clean out of the air one still evening, wrap it in under a minute, and retreat to

her crack in the brick without any visible sign of triumph. Just work, finished, and the next thread already forming.

I have been in this country for a year and five months now. I still translate prices sometimes. I still, some nights, ache for a version of home that exists mostly in memory and my grandmother's voice on a bad connection but I have a library card that works every time. I have my neighbours, I have Meena, and the South Indian group, and a Diwali stall two of us ran last November outside the Campbelltown Library, where an old man I'd never met stopped to ask what the little clay lamps were for and stayed for twenty minutes while I told him, and left saying he'd bring his grandkids next year. None of it is dramatic change but it is web-building — quiet, structural, mostly invisible to anyone not looking closely. Then one day I shed my skin.

The old shell of the spider is still there in the corner of the downpipe. It seems to me now less like a death and more like a receipt or proof that something was here, that it grew, that it left behind an exact impression of a shape it no longer needed.

I am not the same shape I arrived in. I don't think I will ever explain that fully to anyone who has not also had to build a self from scratch in a country that mostly isn't watching. But the black house spider in my backyard knows. She has been telling me, in her own patient, silent way, since April. We are not so different, in the end, both of us spinning our lives out of what the place gives us, both of us underestimated for being small and quiet and easy to walk past, both of us proof, if anyone bothered to look, that intelligence and effort and connection can take a thousand shapes that have nothing to do with the one shape the world has decided to value.

I water the jasmine most evenings now. It has finally taken to the fence. The web is still there beside it, holding its small, ordinary universe together, one invisible thread at a time.

Runner up - *Dewey Eyes* by James Myhill

They were just cardboard boxes.

Old, dusty boxes, covered with cobwebs and surrounded by clutter at the back of the shed, shoved behind a rusty bike, its flat tyres betraying how long it had sat unridden.

But to me, opening those boxes seemed like a mountain to climb.

Since Mum's funeral, they'd stayed buried in the shed, holding memories that I wasn't ready to remember. Mum had packed the boxes herself, when she knew what was coming.

When I finally plucked up the courage to start sorting through them, tears pricked my eyes as I flicked through old photos. I was pictured in many of them, usually with Mum. Dad was in very few. Mum had thrown out his photos after the divorce, but a small sample had somehow found their way through the net.

One was a picture of Dad, Mum and me standing next to an old Holden. Well, the car looked old now. I imagine it would have been new then.

It sparked a memory: whenever Dad filled the car at the servo, he always wrote the mileage and the number of litres in a little booklet he kept in the glove box. He said it was so he could keep a record of fuel consumption, but I remember wondering why he had to do it *every time*. I always just wanted to get going, often seeing cars lined up behind us – but precious minutes were always spent filling in that book.

He was just like that, I guess. Not so much a perfectionist, but maybe just a serial recorder of what, at the time, seemed like trivial things.

In one box I found an old radio with a built-in tape player – complete with a cassette still inside. Possibly an old mix tape. I'd almost forgotten such archaic practices in this age of playlists and podcasts. I remember Dad playing that radio in the bathroom every morning, turned up loud so he could hear it over the noise of the shower.

Later, he gave it to me. I used it so much I must have just about worn it out.

Under the radio, a small, leather-bound notebook caught my eye.

It had a green dymo label on the front – the plastic type with raised lettering. The old glue was well past its use-by date; the label curling at the edges.

It was just one word - "Library"

I opened the first page. My heart skipped when I realised it was Dad's writing, not Mum's. At the top of the page, he'd written:

'Campbelltown Library – corner of Montacute and Newton Roads.' His writing was like a scrawl, but I could just read it.

Starting on the following page, just like the petrol record booklet, he'd kept a record of books that he'd borrowed. Book titles, Dewey decimal call numbers, dates borrowed - and even the due dates.

On each due date he'd marked a neat 'tick" to indicate the return.

He kept his own library record?

Looking back, I wasn't surprised. I was used to records too. Patient histories, test

results, notes scribbled in the margins – little pieces of information that could, put together, reveal something more important.

I raised my eyebrows when I saw the dates. The first book was borrowed in November 1976, not long after Dad and Mum arrived from the UK. Not exactly ten-pound Poms – but close. Dad said it was called "assisted passage" and cost a bit more than ten pounds – but not much.

I'd just been reading about the Campbelltown Library's 50th anniversary. It opened in June 1976. The library must have opened just a few months before Dad's first record entry.

The scrawl indicated the first book he'd borrowed. *'Living in Australia' Robin Boyd, 1970. Call number 720.994. Borrowed, November 6, 1976. Due date, November 20, 1976.*

I wondered why would that have been Dad's first book, borrowed from the library in his new, adopted home?

I put the box aside, placed the small black notebook in my pocket, and grabbed my car keys.

Living in Rostrevor, it was just moments before I pulled up in the leafy library car park, towering gum trees encircling the cars within. The library was in a different location to the original library, having moved in November 1985. The current library was a new reconstruction, a major renovation completed in 2010, making it a true community hub for readers, lifelong learners and people seeking connections through the many programs available.

I couldn't find the title on the shelves, but I met a very helpful librarian called Margaret. She tapped a few keys on her computer and told me the book was here, but was waiting to be sent back to the Tea Tree Gully library – apparently under the "One-Card" system of SA libraries sharing collections.

I explained why I wanted to see it. I showed her Dad's record and she smiled. "This is just like an old library record." she said. "Your dad must have been very organised."

I nodded.

She told me to wait a moment.

Margaret disappeared into a back room and came back with a book in her hand.

"This is due to be sent back later this afternoon, so you can't borrow it now – it's already been reserved by someone else. But you can have a quick look, if you like – just have it back to me in an hour or so."

Cutting through the bookshelves, I found a comfortable armchair seat overlooking Montacute Road and sank into the soft green fabric. I opened the book and started to read. It was a book about Australian homes and contemporary architecture.

I turned a few pages and did a double take. There, on the page, was a picture of our family home. The house I grew up in. The house that Mum left me.

Well, not OUR house, but one that clearly provided the inspiration.

It was nearly identical, even down to the fence.

Dad – and Mum – must have chosen that design from the book. I never even thought about it. Our home was just our home.

But Mum and Dad had planned it. Planned it so I'd have room to live, room to play.

My mind wandered to days fighting off flies and mosquitos at countless backyard barbeques and cool nights spent in a tent under the stars. The house I took for granted had been planned from the start.

I closed the book, returned it to Margaret, with thanks - and re-opened Dad's notebook.

The next entry:

'Wheels magazine, March 1977. Periodical. Borrowed, June 15, 1977. Due date, June 29, 1977.'

Dad worked at British Leyland back in Coventry, before I was born. He was a 'car guy' in England – and here too, joining a local car club soon after he arrived. He always washed the family car every Saturday – religiously. I know he worked for General Motors-Holdens at Elizabeth until Mum and Dad divorced. Probably after that too, but we kind of lost contact.

After he left us, Mum had said he mustn't have really wanted a family. Sometimes Mum would even hint that Dad hadn't even really wanted children,

which made me feel like a mistake. Over time, I guess I parked Dad in a dim corner of my mind where he could be forgotten.

After the divorce, I stayed with Mum and only saw Dad on a few rare occasions – which had withered to nothing for the last twenty years.

Scanning the next few pages of Dad's records, it looked like he borrowed "Wheels" and "Modern Motor" just about every month.

I remembered one year, (back when they were happy) Mum wanted to get him a subscription for his birthday. "Waste of money," he said. "I enjoy getting them from the library."

The specific March 1977 Wheels magazine wasn't on the shelf, but I did find a digital copy, online, through my library membership. This issue had a Ford Falcon GT on the cover. I think Dad would have loved that – despite the Holden rivalry.

I thought about my own car, out in the car park. I hoped no gum sap would drop on it – I washed my car every week too, and it was freshly clean.

Looking around at the stacks of books, open spaces and meeting rooms, I remembered how much Dad loved going to the library. It was his quiet time, a "third place" where he could browse, read and learn. Sometimes I used to think he went to the library just to get away from us. Now I wondered if I had it backwards. Perhaps the library wasn't somewhere he went to escape his life – but somewhere he went to build it.

What was next?

I looked down on Dad's library list.

My brow furrowed.

It was a book called '*Babyhood – Penelope Leach, 1974. Call number 649.112. Borrowed May 12, 1978. Due date, May 26, 1978.'*

Babyhood? I could imagine Mum borrowing this, but Dad?

The date was well before I was born.

I found a copy on the shelf. Flicking through the pages, I saw that was all about childhood development – especially for infants up two years of age. It outlined strategies for parents to follow to understand feeding, sleeping and other behaviours.

I always kind of felt – maybe wrongly, because it was something that Mum sort of hinted at - that I was unplanned. She never actually said that, but would say things like I was a 'lovely surprise'.

But Dad borrowing this book? That was curious.

I flicked to another entry in Dad's notebook.

'*Gregory's Australian guide to sailing and boating: complete manual for the enthusiast – Paul Hopkins, 1979. Call number 797.1. Borrowed September 15, 1984. Due date September 29, 1984.*

A picture jumped into my mind's eye. Dad and I splashing and laughing while swimming in the shallows at Blanchetown on the Murray River, Mum watching from the shore. Remembering the smell of plastic life jackets and acrid 2 stroke fumes took me back. Memories of my arms just about pulled out of their sockets while skiing. Even Dad's muttered swearing when the boat wouldn't start.

Special memories, which I admit I'd largely forgotten. Maybe on purpose.

I do recall how much Dad loved that boat. A small fibreglass runabout, with the name 'Jupiter 2' painted on each side. (Dad was a Lost in Space fan too) Every summer, Dad would take us up the river to ski all day and we'd have sausages, burnt to a crisp on the open flame barbeque, for dinner that night. Sometimes we'd stay at the caravan park, sometimes we'd just camp by the river with the boat pulled up on the sand.

I felt like I had a vault of memories, locked away - and I'd just found the combination.

Reading down the list, there were books about home improvement, vacation planning, car care and maintenance, and travel guides.

The list went on, all the titles ticked as returned. Except one, midway through the records.

'Blinky Bill Goes to the Doctor' - Dorothy Wall, 1982. Call number JP823 WAL. Borrowed October 10, 1985. Due date October 24, 1985. I would have been 5 years old.

I remember Dad reading that book to me. It seems like hundreds of times. Whenever he asked me what book I'd like him to read, it was that one. When I started reading myself it was also my favourite. So much so, I think I still have it, somewhere.

Curious, I went back home and checked in my bookshelf. There it was. A library card in a little sleeve on the back. 'Mal Wishart, borrowed 10/10/1985'. No return stamp.

It had been more than twenty years since I last spoke to him.

I still had his number, written on a scrap of paper in my office desk drawer, nestled between old batteries, broken pencils and dried-out pens.

I just never called it.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment, my heart thumping against my ribs.

I found the scrap of paper – exactly where I had left it years before - and dialled.

"Hello?" His voice sounded older, hesitant. Less confident than I remembered.

"Dad?"

"Victoria?" His voice was shaky.

A pause. I could hear him breathing, shallow and fast.

I nearly hung up.

“I’ve finally been going through Mum’s things.”

“Ah. I heard about your Mum. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t come to the funeral.”

“I didn’t think you’d want me there.”

I had to find out. A mystery, a niggling rock in my shoe for twenty years.

“I found your library record.”

“My old notebook. I’m amazed it survived.”

I closed my eyes and willed myself on.

“Babyhood. Why did you borrow it?”

There was a pause before Dad continued.

“Babyhood. Yes, I remember. Your Mum didn’t know about that one. I wanted to know how to be a good father. I wanted to make sure I was ready.”

“You wanted a family?”

“What? Of course I did.”

“But Mum said…” I stopped. I wasn’t sure I could say the words that had haunted me for so long.

“Dad…did you actually want me?”

The line went silent.

“Victoria, of course I did. You were what mattered. All those family days on the river, the holidays, playing at home in the backyard – I wanted to make memories with you. I still treasure them.”

I started to feel the ground shifting.

“You never returned ‘Blinky Bill Goes to the Doctor.’”

“I couldn’t – it was your favourite. So, I went to the library, paid the fine and bought the book. They were very understanding.”

I smiled despite myself.

“I know you’re a Doctor now. I’m so proud of you, Victoria.”

My breath caught, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak.

“Do you still go to the library?”

“I visit once a week at least. I get a coffee, read a magazine or two. Chat to some others I’ve met there. And I’ve just joined a book club.”

I swallowed. I opened my mouth to say something but stopped.

“Victoria, are you still there?” His voice wavered.

“Maybe…maybe next time, we could meet up? Like, just for a coffee, and a chat?”

I could hear him smiling through a stuttered breath. “I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

I hung up and filled my lungs with air, then let it out slowly. My hammering heart started to unwind. So many memories, so much I thought I’d forgotten.

I realised Dad's library notebook didn't just trace his journey through his life, but was a record of our connection. A connection I thought I'd lost - but had actually been there all along, waiting for me to join the dots.

I was looking forward to seeing him next week, fittingly, where our lives together seemingly began – the Campbelltown Library.

I picked up a tissue and dabbed away tears.

Through Dewey eyes, I could see a new chapter of my own story had just begun.

Runner up - *Pane Della vita - Bread of Life* by Janine Fitzhenry

The ship's horn gave 3 short blasts as it pulled away from the dock with a deliberate slowness. His knuckles had turned white from gripping the rail, and his eyes shone with unshed tears until suddenly, large drops fell onto the ticket clutched in his hand. The print blurred before him: One-way passage: Salerno to Sydney. 17th of July 1976. He choked back tears and cast his eyes out over the dock once more, searching the sea of faces for his family. His father stood tall, his arms around his mother and his younger sister, comforting them as they waved a tearful farewell. As the distance increased between them, the enormity of what he was doing pressed on his heart.

Luciano was certain that he had made the right decision after nearly two years of deliberation. His family, supportive from the start, knew that if he left them to join his uncle in Australia, he would have more opportunities than he would find in Italy. The family had been reading Uncle Alberto's letters for nearly a decade, and his descriptive prose and the photographs that accompanied the letters showed a life where you could be rewarded for hard work. He had sailed away with his small family from their village of Cetara when fishing could no longer support them. Luciano wanted to continue in his grandfather's and father's footsteps when he finished school, but now tourism was the main source of income for the ancient towns, and fish had become scarce on the Amalfi Coast.

He glanced around him on the deck and realised that he was alone. The other passengers had gone to find their cabins, and the dock was just a distant blur. This beautiful coast and everything that he loved so dearly was receding in his vision. He found a bench and sat down heavily, taking the leather satchel from his shoulder to open it. His mother had given it to him as he walked to the ship.

Luciano could smell the loaf of bread before he unwrapped the paper, and he breathed the scent deeply. He took out a piece of cheese, a chunk of pastrami and a jar of olive oil that had been pressed by hand from last season's olives. He held it up against the fading light and watched the pale green-gold liquid move in the glass. Finally, there was a large jar wrapped tightly in cloth. Luciano smiled knowingly. This was the family sourdough bread starter. The yeast that his mother had kept alive since she was married over 30 years ago.

His father had built a wood oven, and every week the family made bread together. Every loaf they ate was started from this yeast. It was such a precious gift. Tied to the jar with a piece of string was a note in his mother's handwriting. 'Pane della vita. Sarà il centro della tua nuova vita. Ti amo, Luciano.'

The tears welled up again as he practised his English, reading it aloud: 'Bread of life. It will be the centre of your new life. I love you, Luciano.' He smiled, knowing that this yeast was his companion as they embarked on the 29-day journey that lay ahead.

The Land Title Deed of South Australia stated that Luciano and Pamela Del Mare owned a parcel of land at Montacute, South Australia. It was dated March 2nd 1986. Lu hugged his heavily pregnant wife and danced her delicately around the kitchen. They would call his parents tomorrow to share this news; they would also celebrate with Uncle Alberto's family on Sunday. He insisted Pamela take a 'pennichella, ' a little nap after lunch, and his heart filled with love as he watched his wife sleep. Lu, as he was now known, walked outside with a contented smile to sit on the sunny porch of their small home and reflect on the past 10 years and his many blessings.

Adjusting to life in South Australia had been difficult at first. In the first 4 years, he worked very long hours, 6 days a week, in his uncle's building business, until he had enough money to buy a block of land in Athelstone. He struggled to learn English even though his uncle, aunt and cousins gave him impromptu lessons. The best learning had come from listening to songs on the radio as they played loudly on the building sites. His homesickness was ever-present, and he wrote a letter home weekly, filling them with accounts of only good things.

It took another year to build his modest three-bedroom home, utilising every spare hour and always grateful for the generous support of his 'Zio' uncle and 'amici' mates.

No matter how busy he was, Lu religiously fed the starter jar with flour and water, and every Sunday he baked the bread for the week. His workmates joked that he should be a baker, but his bread-baking ritual, along with

sending and receiving regular letters, kept him connected to his family, to their traditions and his beloved Amalfi Coast.

He checked on Pamela, still dozing on their bed, and he pinched himself to be so lucky to marry this Bella donna! They met at the Adelaide Central Market five years after he arrived. Lu was doing a concreting job and having lunch with workmates in Lucia's Cafe. Pamela sat across from them, and he tried not to stare at her long blonde hair and sky-blue eyes that twinkled across the cafe. He changed his plans every Friday thereafter to eat at Lucia's, hoping she had her lunch there. And she did. She was first taken by his dark eyes and the love that shone in them when he told her stories of Italian home and family. She loved his accent and the way he said 'Pam -el -a' breaking it down into syllables and emphasising the 'a' on the end, making her name sound musical. At 24, she was 5 years younger than Lu, and she worked as a secretary at the Courthouse directly across the street from the market.

Their courtship lasted just 3 months; he was lovingly welcomed into her family and she into his. Lu showed her his ritual to feed the bread starter, and she became his bread-making partner. Each Sunday they sat in a sunny spot, and their lunch became a loaf of bread torn by hand, still warm from the oven, dipped in olive oil, and eaten. Molto Bene -very good.
Pamela helped Lu with his English pronunciation, and in return he taught her Italian. Lu shared the story of the parting gift from his mother with Pamela, making her cry.

After marrying in 1982, they began a new chapter as they continued to work and save, but they also went to the Marche Club regularly to eat pizza, socialise, and dance. Their home became a wonderful blend of Italy and Australia. They planted fruit trees and a vegetable garden, and Lu put pots in the kitchen window, planting basil, parsley, mint and garlic, which grew well in the sunny nook. After the Sunday bread baking, they would go for a drive in the hills, following 4th Creek and the magnificent river gum trees. Lu loved the hills, the birdlife and local natives, especially the occasional koala and kangaroo. They shared a dream to own some land one day and grow and harvest olives and figs, lemons and chestnuts, tomatoes and zucchini, and sell the fresh produce to the markets.

Today their dream had come true with the purchase of 72 acres in Montacute. Their baby would be born in the new year,1987, and they would move to 'Casa Del Mare' where Lu would finally build a wood oven to bake their bread. This would be their home.

Marco and Marcella ran all the way up to the shed, yelling to their dad, 'it's time, it's time' Lu came out to meet them and, lifting each one high off the ground, he swung them in a circle. 'Time for what, bambini?' He joked, eyes twinkling with delight.

'You know, Dad, time to bake our bread.' They chirped. 'Si, it is time.' Lu confirmed.

Marco was joined by his little sister Marcella, just three years after his arrival. The children had filled the house with love, noise and laughter, and Pamela and Lu's hearts swelled with pride. In the blink of an eye, it was 1996, and Marco was nine years old. The family had great success working the land, parenting and baking bread together. So many things connected Lu to his life in Italy and each task, large or small, ensured they continued the old traditions and established some new.

Trees and plants grew as quickly as the children, and a rhythm of the seasons surrounded the family and their land. Lu had stopped working entirely in the building industry as the farm began to produce and sustain them. Lu often said, 'La dolce vita. The sweet life.'

Fig season was a favourite time for Lu, and they would call in friends and neighbours to help pick the plump fruit. The olive harvest also required many hands to pick and press the perfect green pebble-sized fruit, always saving some to preserve in jars. Walnut and almond time was a favourite of the children as cracking the nuts allowed many to be sampled. Summer delivered delectable vegetables and fruits. Tomatoes were picked in great quantities and taken to market, but there were also many kilos to dry in the sun and to bottle in jars for 'passata' sauce. The zucchini grew by the hour in the summer heat, and their flowers were a delicacy, lightly battered and cooked in oil until golden. The abundance of food was enough to share with family and friends and to donate to the St Francis of Assisi Church to distribute to those in need. Sunday was sacrosanct for making the week's

bread and a long family lunch. The bread starter had pride of place on a shelf in the kitchen, as it had done in the family home in the old country.

Marco was graduating high school in 2006. He was a studious boy who prepared for exams three nights a week, going into the Campbeltown Library straight after school. Pamela met him at the library with a lunchbox containing bread and cheese, pastrami and olives. Luciano insisted he have brain food, and he was immensely proud when his son graduated. Celebrations stretched out over the next week, and then Lu sat down with his family and produced four air tickets to Rome. This was the family's big reward to celebrate before Marco began a degree at the University of South Australia at Magill. It was their first flight and the first trip to Italy for Pamela and the children. They would finally meet their Nona, Nono and Zia Francesca and her family, and their excitement was palpable.

The children were wide-eyed with wonder when they arrived in Rome. The Colosseum, the Vatican, the Pantheon, this ancient city of cobblestones where gladiators once walked. Visiting Campania and the Amalfi Coast was a homecoming for Lu, but it was a revelation for Pamela and the children. Suddenly all of the stories their father had told them throughout their childhood came to life, and the beauty of the Tyrrhenian Sea glistened before their eyes. When they arrived in the village of Cetara, Nona and Nono ran from their home to envelop them in their warm embrace. The familiar smell of bread, the very same bread that they had made in Adelaide, wafted into the warm Italian air.

Marco and Jenny's first child, 'Little Luciano', named after his Nono, arrived in 2016 and his baby sister Bella, nearly two years later. Marcella and Thomas had Diana in 2018 and Dominic was born a year later. And so this third generation, the second born in Australia, arrived neatly in exactly 6 years. Nona and Nono played a big part in their life and the whole family continued the Sunday traditions. The table was now set with ten places for family lunches, and Marco and Lu had extended the table outside under the lemon trees. This was their preferred place to dine al fresco.

First, the ritual of making bread. Nono and Marco set the fire in the oven and watched and waited until the coals were red hot. Carefully, they removed them to the barbecue, where they would soon be used to cook the meat, fish

and vegetables. Nona, Marcella and Jenny had prepared the dough and set it to rise, and now the children sat at the table as Nona scattered flour, giving each one a round piece of dough to knead. Gradually, plump round balls of dough were set in a neat row waiting to be cooked.

Nono threw a handful of flour into the oven to test the temperature, and if it was deemed 'perfetto', the balls of dough were placed carefully, one by one, into the oven with a long stick Nono had made especially for this purpose. The oven door was sealed. The adults drank espresso while the children played. The smell from the oven was heavenly, and the first loaf to come out became the test loaf. As soon as it had cooled slightly, Nona broke it into chunks for everyone to taste, dipped in olive oil. They baked enough bread for three families to eat until the next Sunday. The table was an explosion of colourful dishes made from the farm's produce, but their bread was always the centrepiece.

Lu would turn 80 in 2026, and the family kept asking him what he would like for his special birthday present. His reply was consistent: 'Niente -nothing! How can a man who has everything want more?'
Lu had kept his mother's note and the string that she wrapped around the jar in a small box for the last 50 years. The family yeast was now the same age as Luciano, and every loaf he had eaten had been made from this starter yeast. It connected Italy and Adelaide, his two beloved homes, and it had also fed four generations of the Del Mare family.
Pamela secretly took the note and string and had them framed with a photo of his mother. This would be her gift to Lu, the man who had everything. Pane della vita ~bread of life.

Youth Writer (15-24 years)

Winner – *How to Perfect the Human Race* by Su Nguyen

There have been many obsolete plans conspired for our diseased, infected race,
Yet there are only few implications nowadays to make it stick.

The first is to make the man repent for the direction his heart takes
when another man's hand finds it, before taking him away.
You will require Leviticus 20:13, threatful men in white coats,
a cold chain-bolted room, photographs of naked men,
electrodes for the wrists, apomorphine for the stomach,
and someone in legalities to testify the emitted screaming a cure.

Or, you can address the man in slurs and teach his blonde neighbour
that the man beside him is worth less.
A yellow star will help, followed by a tattooed serial number,
a freight car, and several days without water before you
shut him in with broken shower heads, dirt-bare skin, and hundreds of
other bodies until sweat runs thick and all cannot breathe.
Give him Zyklon B; a good amount of it too; and stop only when
Samael finally swoops upon his malnourished corpse and takes away his
tired soul.

You may, if control was the desired, have him handicap the wife he
claims to love until the only use left for her body is to carry another on.
Wrap her eyes in a veil until the world reduces to a cage of cloth,
lock the school doors, ban the books from her hands and
make her ask a man before crossing the street.
Take her voice, her name, her future, but be sure to
leave the organ intact; that is the part you'll want.
Let it swell, split, and bleed when the child comes, and make sure she
washes the smeared blood from the polished marble before its first cry.
Let the curve of leather scar her skin purple red
and tell her to pick up the laundry, again.

And as you sail the seas to step foot atop newfound land,
you shall claim it your own, draw a border through it, rename the rivers,

and put new titles on the map for it was always terra nullius.
Then you shall take the children, though just ones not of your king and
with a government ledger, form a mission where enough
coaxed white men have decided with nothing but feathered ink quills
And some stained rough parchment
how to colour-correct the next wave.

There are, as stated, many ways our race can be saved.
But if all the trouble has been sought,
then you will have very little left to do.
And if they all keep their obedient heads bowed,
your hands need not work and shall reside peacefully,
pending the next slip of the tongue.

Runner up - *Timeless Connection* by Rachel Trudy Diprose

I don't know how it started, how does any adventure start but on a very sour note.
By then, I had already assumed she didn't like my boyfriend Kyle, but everything came to a head that day.

My train of thought broke as I defended myself, "Are you ever going to stop treating me like a child?" But My mum just ignored me and kept ranting, "What happened with him?" My mum exclaimed. "I don't like that boy. Something about him just creeps me out, sweetheart."

"You don't even know him!"

"You're right I don't know him but I know his type. Just stop acting so childish and listen to me for once".

"What, like dad listened to you?" I watched her face fall.

I regretted what I said as soon as it left my mouth. But words aren't so easy to put back once they're out. I'll have to ask Edward if there's an invention for that. But truth be told, he'd probably say it's simply self-control.

My mum wasn't getting anywhere, so she took a softer approach. "Look, sweetheart, something just doesn't seem right about him". I scoffed, trying to move past her.

She stopped me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Look, you don't have to like what I'm saying, but you do have to listen. Someone who is blinded by love doesn't see the small things clearly." She released my shoulder. "Just please, promise me you'll get a second opinion. Like someone gave me once."
"What would you know?", I huffed moving past her, I just needed to get out of there.

My anger faded as I walked, turning into something sharper.
Something sadder.

By the time I had gotten to the shop, I didn't know what to do anymore.

But I still opened the door, the bell making an obnoxious sound when it slammed shut.

The Campbelltown Invention Shop. Home to some of the best inventors, including my best friend, Edward.

“You know, if you keep on checking up on me, I’m never going to get anything done.” Edward came out of the back room looking mildly annoyed. “Relax, it's not your boss, it's just me” his face lit up when he saw me but quickly fell, “What's wrong?” I didn’t even realise I was crying until he wrapped me in a warm hug.

“Nothing your hugs don’t fix” he looked down at me and I sighed. “My mum and I had a fight, she actually said that I need a second opinion.” “On what?” he questioned, moving away to check on his workspace. I followed close behind like I always did. “She says my boyfriend creeps her out, that she knows his type. I mean, what does that even mean, she knows his type?”

“Hmm, maybe you’re getting lost in translation” he says thoughtfully.

Cogs and blueprints are scattered everywhere when we step into the back room. Gadgets and final projects line the walls in all their glory.

“What do you think, is my boyfriend really that bad?” Edward freezes in-front of his desk with a look on his face. His lips purse tightly, holding back what he wanted to say. Sighing he shook his head “no comment”. My eyebrows furrow in confusion, “What do you mean by that?”. Edward looked at me then looked away. “We will be revisiting this” I told him, feeling unsettled.

I look towards the desk, “so what are you working on now?” My eyes hover over a small device on a stand.

“it’s a device that can distraught timewaves around you and break through them. All very technical stuff, now hand me that little thingamabob.” I smile at him, “oh yes, all very technical stuff”. He laughed a little grabbing the tiny screw from the bench.

“Hey stop your teasing, I just so happen to be very good at what I do” he lifts my chin with his finger. “Huh, Is that why your latest invention almost caught fire and Isaac hasn’t let you out of his sight?” He laughed at that, “That wasn’t my fault.” He smiled, letting his finger drop from my chin.

“Okay, that was a little my fault. But, if I don’t finish this in the next few days, Isaac will have my head.”

“So how does it work?” I asked, my eyes flickering up towards his. “Well, you just click that button and it can transport you to anytime, anyplace, but there’s a…”. “Could I please borrow it?” I beg, giving him puppy dog eyes.

“Sure,” he says but quickly doubles back. “Under one condition, I come with you. So you don’t break any time travel rules”. He hands me the black manual off the bench.

“Some of the rules you need to know before we go anywhere.”

I rolled my eyes, but still flipped through it stopping on a certain page.

“Rule 62: Don’t wear white after labour day; it’s in bad taste.”

I tilted my head a little and looked at him, “really?”. he smiled brightly at me, “hey! Time travellers have senses of humour too you know”. I giggled at that, Edward seemed to perk up at that smiling along with me. I flipped through the pages some more, “is there anything useful in here or is it all time travel jokes?”. “When you make your own time travel device, then you can make the black book however you want”. He snatched the book from my hands. “I underlined the important rules, beautiful” he muttered. I strained my ears, but still failed to hear the last word.

“See” he holds the book up.

“Rule 84: Don’t let your past self see you. It could change your future.”

“Hmm” I smiled at him, a mischievous glint in my eye. “I know that tone, don’t you dare, we…!!”

I grabbed his hand, clicking the button on the device. After the light flashed green, the world blurred at the edges, taking us somewhere in time.

The clicking sound abruptly stopped, and it felt like we had hit a brick wall. I felt the wind change around us, completely knocking it out of our lungs.
I stood, catching my breath, letting the world come back into focus.
Something didn't seem right.
"What the hell" I looked around, trying to make sense of it. "This isn't where I wanted to go. I think your device might be broken."
"Oh, this is the self-cleaning shoes all over again" my hand raked through my hair."

He ignored my comment and spoke, "no you're just impatient. It's not finished, and it has a catch. It doesn't take you where you want to go; it takes you where you need to go."

I go to walk a few paces in front of him. "What time machine even works like that, really?"

He deadpanned, "The one you just pushed". He sighed, "and apparently Doctor Who's."

"I meant real time machines, but point taken". "What are we going to do? This is a disaster." I held my hands over my face trying to calm myself down. "This is not where I wanted to go at all" the tears came on their own, my throat feeling impossibly tight.

Edward catches up to my side, slowing me down for a moment. "I know", he wrapped his arms around me and everything stopped. "I know you wanted to go see your father. Trust me, I miss him too. He was a good man. I wanted to see him too. But we can't be stuck in the past like this, it can't help us." "Says the one who made a time travel device," I muttered through tears. "So I'm a hypocrite and a genius, that hardly seems my fault" He kissed my forehead gently. I laughed a little at that.

He pulled me along with him, "You just need to see what you need to see and then we can go back; it's as simple as that."

The sound of low humming wafted through the air, it felt familiar.

I started walking before I even realised what I was doing. Towards the melody, towards something warm.

My eyes gazed past him into the little shop on the corner.

“But don’t worry, we can- Cassie, where are you……?”

Edward worriedly reached for me, but I was already at the door peering inside I remember it was cold that day. Though I never understood why My mum wouldn't close the door.

My mum was standing there, younger, wrestling with a five-year-old me whose legs swayed, hanging over the tall chair. “Tell me if I’m pulling to hard, okay sweetheart?”. I nodded a little, then returned to whatever I was focusing on. She guided the brush through my hair, gently working through the tangles.

Edward came up behind me placing a hand on my shoulder. His eyes focused on the scene. “Did you own a flower shop or something?”

“No, why do you ask?” Then, why are there so many flowers inside?” Edward questioned, leaning close to my ear. My eyebrows furrow slightly, but I keep my eyes on My mum.
“I forgot this, how could I forget this?”

Then My mum heard a loud crash from behind her, she froze for a second then something like instinct took over. “Sweetheart, let's play hide and seek” My mum said in a rushed tone. At that age, I couldn’t hear the edge in it and smiled up at her. My mum quickly slid me off the chair, bending to meet my level. “Since you're such a good hider, why don’t you go hide first?” Little me giggled and ran off, hiding in a nearby cupboard. My attention turned back to My mum who was looking towards the doorway like it was explosive.

The stomping grew louder, practically echoing off the hallway walls. My mum braced herself like she was preparing for war.

A man came out of the doorway, big and imposing. My mum met his eyes with a steely glare.

Who the hell is that?

He came to stand over her, intimidating her without a single word. “Where has that daughter of yours gotten to, Linda?” he leaned down a little and My mum immediately tensed up.

“I don’t know, she probably ran down the street to play with that friend of hers”.

“That stupid girl is never here when I need her. I’ll be going out now, when I come back, that door”. he pointed a grimy finger, “better be closed, it’s freezing in here and no one's gonna buy stuff anyway”. He shoved past her, moving towards the door. Edward pulled me back just in time, as the man came barrelling out. He glared at me, “Watch it girl.”

I looked back at My mum, feeling a strange pull towards her, but Edward held me back. “You can't, rule 84, remember?” I looked towards My mum again, conflicted. “Little me is in a cupboard, I’ll be careful, I promise”.

“Hey mu…… amm, you alright?”

“Yeah I’m fine” she smiled but it was strained.

I give her a look.

“No really, he’s not usually like that. I just get on his nerves. He’s sweet, and he gets me flowers every time he apologises, so.” I look around a little, “he must apologise lots.” “Yeah he does,” her eyes started welling up with tears. “I'm so sick, of being scared all the time.”

“Then leave” I mutter, but I know she heard me; she always does.

“He owns this store. If I leave, I have nothing”.

“I am nothing,” she said.

I'll be the first to admit, I flinched.

"No, that's not true, it might feel like it because he tells you it over and over." I walk forward to grab her hands in mine, feeling the familiar words make my heart clench.

I speak slowly, letting my words sink in, "You will have your daughter and the freedom to breathe again. Isn't that enough?".

She smiled, a real one this time. "You can sell the flowers, it should be enough to get you out of here".

"Thank you" she looked towards us gratefully; "you have more courage than I do right now."

I looked down at the ground, shaking my head a little.

"No, I, not really. I'm so sorry" My mum pulled me into a hug, safe and warm.

"What's your name?"

"I", hesitation filled my face.

"Laura, her name's Laura", Edward answers behind me.

She smiles at him, "That's my daughter's middle name!"

"You don't say?" he grabs my hand slowly guiding me away. I look at him and he's already smiling at me. "I mean, what are the odds?"

"You should get going, would hate for you to be late." My mum called from behind me.

We walked away from her, hoping things would be better. the light on the device was still red though. We both went back to where the invention shop was being built, of course back then it was a watch-fixing shop. "You know, she would always say 'be careful how you use those words, they can cut

someone down just as easily as they build someone up'. I think I finally understand that. It was never her fault; and I never really blamed her over what happened to him" I breathed, finally exhaling for what felt like months.

Edward finally smiled at me, threading his fingers through mine, "looks like you'll be able to tell her yourself". He held the device up to me. The light was green; we could go home.

A few hours later

I barged in the front door, my face a complicated mix of emotions. "You're late I-" she pauses for a beat to look at me. "What's wrong, honey?" I threw myself towards her without a second thought. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I left". She grabbed my face in her hands. "No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said those things". I shook my head firmly, leaving no room for argument. "Don't apologise" I sighed taking in a shaky breath. "You were right."

A thought wafted through my mind. Quiet, but all too apparent. "Mum, the person who gave you the second opinion, what was their name?" My mum thought for a long moment as if trying to pull the memory out of thick fog.

"Her name was Laura."

I felt the air go out of my lungs. "Are you okay, Cassie?", Mum pulled back from me looking confused. A smile broke through, turning into a laugh, "Yes". I hugged My mum tighter.

"I can honestly say I am."

Runner up - *I'm Glad You Called* by Naisha Raj

It was currently two degrees in Adelaide, pouring with rain. The heater of Campbelltown Library was cranked to the max, and I was wrapped in a patchwork scarf my mother had sewn for me when I was just five months old. It hardly covered my neck, the pieces of yarn having stretched out, abnormally large gaps in the work as a result of all the times I tried to put it on, but I loved it all the same.

In the quiet study booth of the library, I had my novels spread out across the desk in front of me, my laptop open with an episode of a Norwegian drama that I had gone through my best friend's Google Drive for the link to.
My headphones were in a tangled mess, causing my already disastrous posture to worsen by the minute. The red nail polish on my fingers was slightly smudged from earlier that day, when I had chased my sister around the house after szhe had tried to eat an entire bowl of sweets.

I placed the mug of chai which my mother had lovingly brewed for me before I left onto the desk, letting my forehead hit the cold, hard laminate, and letting out an internal groan. The unpleasant sensation sent a chill up my spine as my lip curled in distaste.

My stomach felt queasy, painful cramps causing me to feel like spewing everywhere - a less than desirable reminder to book a doctor's appointment.

Suddenly,

Rrriiiinggg!!!!

The small electronic device on my study table started ringing, jumping around as though off its rocker. The loud buzzing resulted in dozens of angered stares from others in the library, as I apologised profusely, face burning up with embarrassment.

Who could possibly be calling me at this moment?

"Hello?"

My father's unsure tone rang out. "Hey kiddo. It's me. How are you? How's everything? Keeping up with schoolwork alright?"

I grimaced at the voice coming from the other end of the phone, feeling my fists clench in what I could only describe as indescribable anger. *What the hell? Who did he think he was?*

"Dad. I graduated seven years ago," I gritted out, mindful of the volume of my conversation. *How could he forget?* He was front row at my graduation. He watched me give a speech and he was the second loudest to cheer - after my mother, of course.

"Right. I'm sorry. Um..." I could hear him fidgeting in the background, desperately searching for something to say, seemingly grasping at straws. I had come to accept, years ago, that my own father didn't have any clue about who I was, or who I wanted to become. Nor did he seem to have any interest in understanding that.

When he spoke again, he seemed a little *off.* His tone wasn't perfectly rehearsed, as it usually was when he called me. "Is now a good time, actually? Not sure. You're always busy when I call."
There it was. The passive-aggressive statement. Often, when he spoke to me, there would be an offhanded, micro, almost provoking comment, which if I was to point out, would make me sound insane.

Another moment of this, I may simply go insane.

"Actually," I started, standing up and leaving the quiet study room to stand in the entry hallway of the library. A small child was sitting on a bench, his bright green shirt making him hard to miss. He watched me curiously, an expression between awe and confusion plastered across his slightly chubby face.

"I'm glad you called, dad. My car broke down last week, and I owe the company another hundred dollars for their services. I can't really dish that much out right now."
Nothing wrong with a little white lie here and there, right?

My father sighed. "Uh, yeah. Sure, totally. It's a hundred you need, right?"

“Yeah,” I muttered into the phone, awkwardly. Suddenly, I became more aware of the fluorescent-clad child watching me like a hawk in the background. His mouth was slightly open, as he was actively picking his nose.

I felt my breakfast begin to creep up my throat.

Although I criticised my father for being unable to hold conversations with me, I was truly no better. While I did try to make an effort, it often resulted in angry shouting matches, tears, and cries of “don’t *ever* contact me again!,” before I would contact him a week later for petrol money. As unproud as I was to say it, this seemed to be the longest-lasting conversation I had had with my father in over seven years.
It was *shameful,* to say the least.

Outside, the rain pelted down harder, thunder clouds rolling in and crashing loudly.
I watched as the large drops of rain pelted harshly against the roof of my second-hand Mazda, which I had taken driving lessons in as a teenager. I had asked my father to teach me to drive, but he was often so engrossed in his work life, that I ended up taking lessons with my best friend’s father, in which I’d often scratch up the car from choppy right-turns.

“Um, I’ve sent you the money. Glad to see you’re doing alright, kiddo.”
“Yeah, I guess.” I looked down at my chipped manicure set and frowned. “I’m okay. Same old.”

I heard him clear his throat over the phone. “Doesn’t seem like you want to talk much. I’ll call you another time.”
“‘Kay.”
“See ya kiddo. Love you.”
“Mhm.”

The hang up tone sounded. I placed the phone down, feeling empty. I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore.
Turning around, the nose-picking kid had disappeared.

*

1 new message • father

I frowned at my phone, confused. My cat was curled up on my lap, purring quietly on the fleece blanket my mother had nicked from an airline I had flown as a kid. *One More Time* by *The Cure* was blasting through my living room on vinyl, slightly scratched from the time I had dropped it only floor from a paper cut.

Opening the message, it was a five-word message, with an image attachment. The photo was from my childhood, when I wore matching ugly Christmas sweaters with my father, and an obnoxious reindeer antler headband. I was hugging him as he gave me a piggy back, both of us smiling widely. My missing teeth were visible in the image, causing me to cringe.

The message, as simple as a five-word message could get, read, '*back when you loved me.'*

A second message came in.

'*Lol.'*

My grip around my phone tightened, my slightly yellowed teeth clenching so hard, I was worried one may just break. The nerve was truly infuriating. After big arguments, I'd often receive childhood photos from him, but today was the first time I'd received such a message.

Angrily, I dialled his number, hands shaking with rage.
When he picked up, he spoke sarcastically, in such a tone, that to an outsider, may seem innocent. But I knew better.

"Hey, kiddo. Glad you called." The way he spoke was like a match to gasoline. He spoke in such a tone that he sounded almost grateful that I picked up. Like as if he *missed* it.

"I am not your *kiddo*. Don't call me again, I mean it."

*

1 year later

Rrriiiinggg!!! Rrriiinnnngggg!!!! Rrrriiiinnnggg!!!!!
'You have reached, Mr R. I'm unable to take your call right now - unless you're my daughter. Please leave a message.'

The voicemail tone sounded out, my late father's voice reaching my ears. It was strangely calming this time, and it had a strange way of dissolving any built-up anger I had left in me.

"Hey, dad? Have I ever told you that I'm so glad you called me every day?"
.
.
.
"I'm sorry.

Junior Writer (7-14 years):

Winner - *The Boy and the Duck* by Callum Harmer

I walk alongside Fourth Creek to Stradbroke School every day, except Saturday and Sunday.
Sometimes I see ducks, but not every day.
I like ducks.
They waddle, fly, and swim when the creeks fill with water.

> *I waddle, fly and swim along the creek every day.*
> *Sometimes I see humans, but not every day.*
> *I like humans, sometimes.*
> *They walk, run, and ride on fast machines when they're in a hurry.*

Ducks make a noise that sounds like a quack, but I don't think they're saying quack.
I wonder what they're really saying.
I think they're talking in a different language that no one knows except ducks.
Maybe they're talking about us.

> *Humans make noise that sounds like blah blah-blah blah blah blah.*
> *I wonder what they're really saying.*
> *I think they're talking in a different language that no one knows except humans.*
> *Maybe they're talking about us.*

I don't like the water, but ducks like the water and I like ducks.
Maybe a duck could teach me to swim.
I think I'd swim with them and have fun with them, but a duck might not like the pool.
It's not like the creek; it has smelly chlorine and there are no plants or insects for a duck to eat.

> *I don't like the water, even though I'm a duck.*
> *Maybe a human could teach me to swim.*
> *I think I'd swim with it and have fun with it, but a human might not like the creek.*

It's not deep like their swimming holes, and it has slippery rocks and sludgy mud.

Sometimes I stare at ducks because they're so cute.
Maybe it's the same duck, but they all look similar.
I see it on the bank of the creek.
I think it's staring at me too.

Sometimes I stare at humans because they're different.
Maybe it's the same human, but they all look similar.
I see it on the path alongside the creek.
I think it's staring back at me.

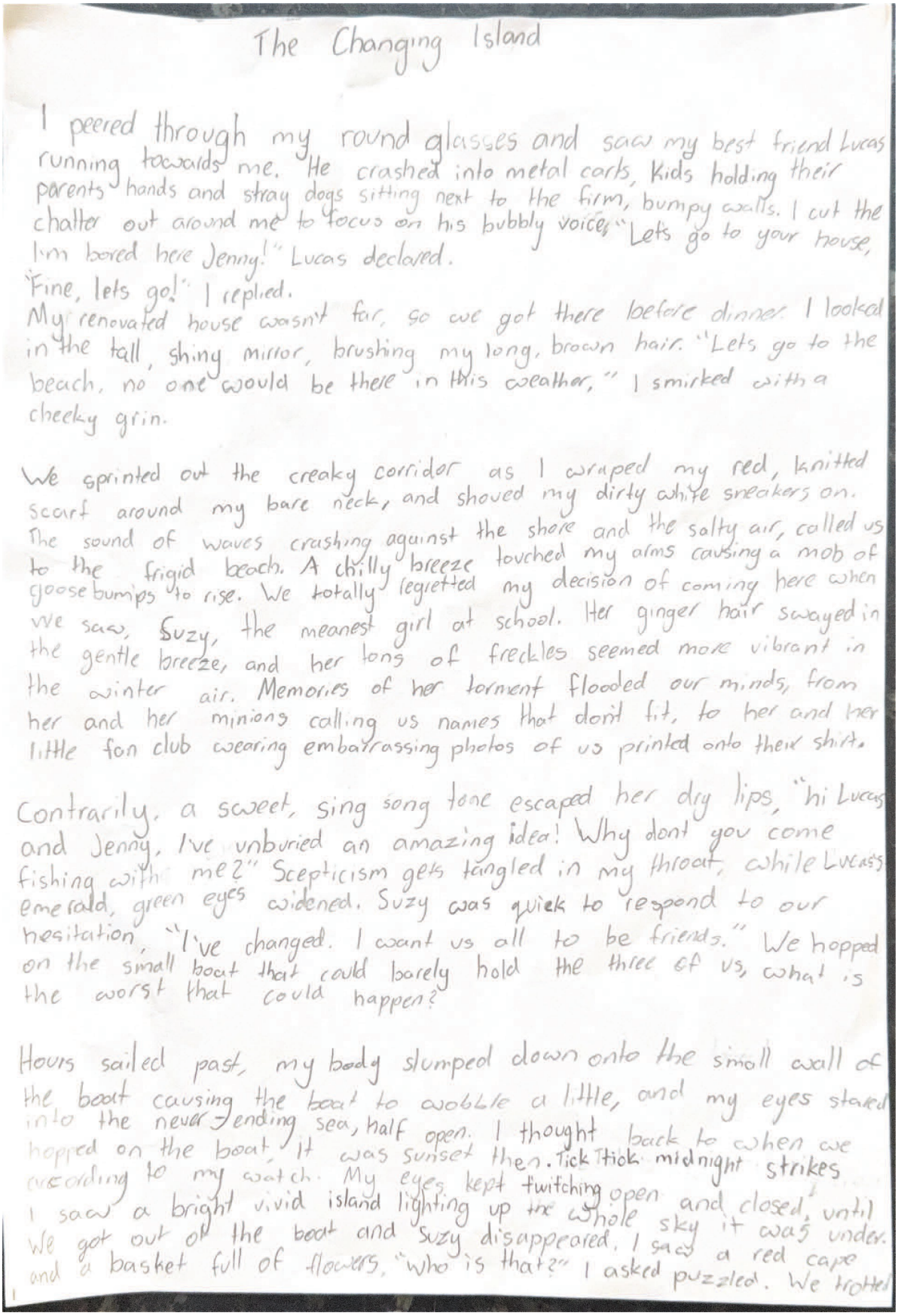
One day, I slipped off the path because I was too busy watching the duck on the bank.
I slid down the bank into Fourth Creek.
The duck quacked but didn't fly away.
I stood and stepped over the slippery rocks, through the sludgy mud to the bank.

One day, I was watching the human on the path and they slipped.
They slid down the bank into the water.
The human said blah, blah-blah blah blah, but they didn't run away.
They stood and stepped over the slippery rocks, through the sludgy mud to the bank.

The next day I saw the duck again, I think they were waiting for me.

The next day I saw the human again, I was waiting for them.

Runner up – *The Changing Island* by Kayla Farnham



The Changing Island

I peered through my round glasses and saw my best friend Lucas running towards me. He crashed into metal carts, kids holding their parents' hands and stray dogs sitting next to the firm, bumpy walls. I cut the chatter out around me to focus on his bubbly voice, "Lets go to your house, I'm bored here Jenny!" Lucas declared.
"Fine, lets go!" I replied.
My renovated house wasn't far, so we got there before dinner. I looked in the tall, shiny mirror, brushing my long, brown hair. "Lets go to the beach, no one would be there in this weather," I smirked with a cheeky grin.

We sprinted out the creaky corridor as I wraped my red, knitted scarf around my bare neck, and shoved my dirty white sneakers on. The sound of waves crashing against the shore and the salty air, called us to the frigid beach. A chilly breeze touched my arms causing a mob of goose bumps to rise. We totally regretted my decision of coming here when we saw, Suzy, the meanest girl at school. Her ginger hair swayed in the gentle breeze, and her tons of freckles seemed more vibrant in the winter air. Memories of her torment flooded our minds, from her and her minions calling us names that don't fit, to her and her little fan club wearing embarrassing photos of us printed onto their shirts.

Contrarily, a sweet, sing song tone escaped her dry lips, "hi Lucas and Jenny, I've unburied an amazing idea! Why dont you come fishing with me?" Scepticism gets tangled in my throat, while Lucas's emerald, green eyes widened. Suzy was quick to respond to our hesitation, "I've changed. I want us all to be friends." We hopped on the small boat that could barely hold the three of us, what's the worst that could happen?

Hours sailed past, my body slumped down onto the small wall of the boat causing the boat to wobble a little, and my eyes stared into the never-ending sea, half open. I thought back to when we hopped on the boat, it was sunset then. Tick Tick midnight strikes according to my watch. My eyes kept twitching open and closed, until I saw a bright vivid island lighting up the whole sky it was under. We got out of the boat and Suzy disappeared. I saw a red cape and a basket full of flowers, "who is that?" I asked puzzled. We trotted

closer and saw little red riding hood, surrounded by what looked straight out of the book. I went up to her and found that she looked as pale as a ghost. She asked us in a suprised tone, "what are you doing here? How did you discover this island? People come here only to be trapped in this land, so fairytales keep apearing. You need to get out of here!"
"How?" Lucas asked.
"You need to catch up to each main character of each story and ask them can I have a clue? These clues will lead you to an enchanted boat that could teleport you to your home land." Lucas and I set off leaving me so puzzled. What did she mean by more fairytales, and each main character of each fairytale? All my thoughts flew away when we both heard a loud, DING!

Suddenly the world around me shook and little red riding hood vanished. A huge, bright green beenstalk charged up, and I heard a giant growl coming from above me. I checked my watch and found out it had been one whole hour since Lucas and I got to this island. I climbed up the spiky beanstalk, and saw a giant and Jack, from Jack and the beanstalk. Jack was about to be stomped on, so I quickly pushed Jack out of the way and sprinted back. I felt like a superhero saving a fairytale character. Lucas reminded me to ask Jack. My mind rushed back to the moment with little red riding hood, "tell them can I have a clue." she said.
I told Jack, "Give me a clue,"
Jack told Lucas and I to walk up to the nearest tree of the bottom of the beanstalk, and there you will be one step closer to the boat. good luck!" At the very moment we reached the tree we heard another DING!

My feet felt like they were levitating, so I looked over to Lucas. It looked like the distance between his feet, and the floor was the length of a small car. I looked down trying to see what was happening underneath my muddy shoes. I looked around me and saw Lucas was following my movements. I saw an old dusty trail and a few crusty leaves. I was looking at Lucas when my feet droped to the unyielding terrain. My hand shot up pointing to a gingerbread house and what looked like a handful of candy dumped onto the roof. That's when it hit me if the other worlds were fairytales, this must be one as well. We walked up to the house, "Hansel, Gretel give us a clue please." I called out once I realized it was the fairytale. The person who opened the door was not who we expected.
It was the evil witch. Even though she is a main character she is not who we were looking for. I barged in, her nasty smell and her loud

footsteps followed me. I saw Hansel and Gretel; they were trapped in the foul-smelling room. I saw a open window beside me and yelled, "crumb on, we need to get moving!"

"We helped you escape that one-of-a-kind house, can you give us clue?" Lucas asked

"Yes, you have to find the big, blue bird, at least ten trees north from here. There the bell will ring again," they echoed together.

We ran north determined to get out of the island, There was a big, blue bird, the size of a big guitar. As if hansel and gretel predicted it the bell rang. We were traveling throug all the fairytales from Cinderella to Snow White, feeling a rush of golden glow glide through us.

Finally, at the latest moment of the morning we saw a glowing, out of the ordinary boat. We knew it was the correct boat so we hopped on and got teleported back to our small town and found our selves on the shoreline. Lucas and I got up and tried to straighten our soaked clothes, happy to be back. Suzy came up to us and asked us in a sassy tone, "so you escaped?" I bluntly refused to answer because I knew I would cause drama. After a long silence she drifted off with a scornful look. "So she didn't change?" I giggled to Lucas. We both trailed of to our houses and I lied to my parents I was at Lucas's house, and now I am tired. So, I rested on my bed and lost all my shivers and frights. Finally I got to rest. "The beginning of today was exhausting," I told my self as I drifted off to sleep, dreaming of all the connections I made.

By: Kayla Farnham

3

Runner up - *Two Windows and Two Lamps* by Chloe Staykov

The apartment smelled of fresh paint. Boxes sat in towers along the hallway, taped shut with Florence's careful, blocky handwriting. *Books. Kitchen. Do not lose this one.* She had written that on the box with her grandmother's teapot.

Campbelltown was a small, quiet town. There were tidy gardens, tall trees, and the hum of rain settling over the leaves. It was perfect. The type of town she had dreamed of living in as a child. Her new bedroom looked out over a narrow road onto another building. It had red bricks, black drainpipes, and a dozen dark windows stacked like a crossword with half the letters missing.

That first night, she didn't unpack. She sat on the floor with her back against the bed frame and watched the rain slide down the glass in long lines. It was oddly calming.

Across the street, a light came on.

Third floor, second window from the left. A lamp, yellow and low, the kind that you would find in an old motel. A figure settled into a chair beside it. Too far to see a face. Just a shape, and what appeared to be a book.

Florence watched the figure until her own room went cold around her, and then she went to bed without meaning to remember the light at all.

But she did.

The second night, she noticed the time. It was 8:20. The kettle in the kitchen clicked off behind her, and she carried her tea to the window. 8:20, and there it was. The lamp. The book. The person.

She didn't think anything of it, not yet. Just a coincidence with good timing.

By the end of the first week, she noticed something else. When the lamp across the street switched on, she found her hand moving to her own light without deciding to do it, the two rooms blinking awake within seconds of each other, as though something had been agreed between them without either party being told.

She caught herself smiling about it once, and felt faintly ridiculous, and did it again the next night anyway.

October came, and the city outside seemed to soften into spring, bottle brush trees covering the pavements with red. The rain was warmer and lighter now. Easier to walk through too. Florence's days were full of the difficulty of being new. A university where she didn't know which corridors led where, new people, and she had taken the wrong bus twice before she finally got on the right one. Third time’s the charm.

But the evenings had this. The lamp. The window. The small ritual of it.

One night, the person across the street opened their curtains rather than having them closed. It was a small, deliberate gesture. Florence watched for a moment, then crossed her own room and did the same, tying hers loosely at the side the way her grandmother used to.

The following evening, the curtains across the street were open again before Florence had even sat down. She thought, with a small jolt, that it had been done for her.

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The wave happened by accident.

Florence was carrying a mug to the window, and she lifted her free hand out of habit, some private goodnight gesture meant for no one, a thing she did sometimes without noticing. Except that night, when she looked up, the shape by the lamp had gone very still.

Then, unmistakably, a hand rose and moved, slow and small, back and forth.

Florence stood there with her mug cooling in her hand and felt something in her chest turn over, gently, like a page.

Florence waved back properly this time, no accident in it at all.

Neither of them moved for a long moment after that. Two lit windows, two still figures, the street between them empty and shining with rain that had only just stopped. Then the figure across the street sat back down, and Florence did too, and that was it. That was the whole thing. It didn't need to be more than that.

It became a language.

A wave meant *goodnight*, or sometimes *good morning*, depending on the hour.

The lamp switched off and on twice, quickly, meant *I'm still here*.

Once, in November, on a sunny day, the figure across the street held a piece of paper to the glass. Florence leaned forward and made out the words in thick marker.

I finished my book.

Florence smiled, found a scrap of paper of her own, and wrote back, *WAS IT GOOD?*

She never saw a face clearly. Not properly. Just the outline of someone a little taller than her, a little older maybe, hair pulled back, always a book close at hand, sometimes a mug that steamed faintly in the lamp's small warmth. She built a person out of gestures and lamplight and the patient shape of someone reading by a window every night at 8:20, and she liked, very much, not knowing anything else.

Summer settled properly over the city. The window became the only appointment Florence never missed. University was still difficult in its ordinary, grinding way. Friendships still tentative and half-formed, the corridors still occasionally unfamiliar. But there was this. The kettle clicking off. The walk to the window with a hot mug. The rectangle of yellow light appearing right on time, across the street.

She stopped feeling ridiculous about it. She started, instead, to feel something closer to lucky.

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The night everything went wrong. Nothing dramatic happened at all, which was somehow worse.

Florence had made her tea. She crossed to the window. She turned on her lamp, the way she did every night, without a single thought that it might not work the way it always had.

Across the street, nothing.

The window stayed dark.

She told herself it was nothing. A late night. A trip to the shops. She sat by the glass anyway, tea going cold in her hands, and waited.

The window stayed dark the whole evening.

The next night, she tried again. Lamp on at 8:20, curtains open, the small performance of it all exactly the same as always. The window across the street remained a black square among the lit ones.

The night after that, the same.

Florence found herself checking, uselessly, throughout the day, glancing at the building on her walk to the bus stop, at the particular window on the third floor, second from the left. She hoped that she would see something. She never did. Curtains closed. No sign of anyone.

She didn't cry over it, not exactly, though there was an evening where she sat with her knees pulled to her chest and felt the specific, quiet loneliness of missing someone she had never actually met. It embarrassed her a little, how much it hurt, this soft and formless grief for a stranger she couldn't have named or described beyond a shape and a lamp.

It was a Tuesday when she saw the truck.

She was leaving for university, when she noticed it parked outside the building across the street, back doors open, a ramp lowered onto the pavement. Two men were carrying a sofa between them. They were very careful and unhurried.

Florence stopped on the pavement and stared up at the third floor, second window from the left. The curtains were gone. The room behind the glass looked bare and strange without them, just walls and the ghost-pale rectangle where a picture must have hung.

She crossed the road without waiting for a gap in the traffic, nearly missed by a cyclist. She came to a stop a little way from the truck, breath slightly ragged.

And there, beside a stack of boxes labelled in blue marker, stood a girl. Taller than Florence, dark hair pulled into a loose knot, a coat that looked too thick for the weather, a paperback book sticking out of her coat pocket the way other people carry a phone.

They looked at each other.

Neither of them moved for what felt like a very long time, though it could only have been a few seconds. The street carried on around them, a bus, a bicycle bell, the low murmur of the men still working, and none of it seemed to touch the small, still space that had opened up between the two of them.

Then the girl smiled, the kind of smile that arrives slowly and changes a whole face when it gets there, and lifted one hand in the gesture Florence already knew so well.

Florence crossed the last few steps of pavement between them.

"Hi," the girl said. Her voice was lower than Florence had imagined, warmer too, with the faintest catch of nerves in it.

"Hi," Florence said back.

It was such a small word for so many months of lamps and folded paper and curtains opened in the dark. But it didn't feel small. It felt like the last piece finally set down.

Her name was Scarlett. She was moving because her mum had got a new job. The apartment she had found had cheaper rent. Scarlett’s new place was only 10 minutes away from the old one, not so far after all, though far enough that a shared window would no longer be part of either of their days. Scarlett talked with her hands. She laughed at things before she finished saying them. She had a chip on her front tooth from a bicycle accident when she was nine.

They walked together, in no particular hurry, Florence's university forgotten for the moment. They talked about the books Scarlett had been reading, about the paper messages, about which of them had started the waving, a small dispute neither of them really wanted to win.

At the corner they exchanged numbers, properly, with names attached this time, and Florence felt the strangeness of it, how ordinary and how enormous it was, to finally have both.

Behind them, back across the narrowing street, Florence's bedroom window still glowed faintly yellow from the lamp she'd forgotten to switch off.

She didn't need it any more, not in the same way. But she was glad it was still there. It had taken two windows, two lamps, and no words at all to make a connection like this one.