



# Change

Northern Beaches Young Writers'  
Competition Finalists 2025



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**KALOF**

## Change

Northern Beaches Young Writers' Competition Finalists 2025

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# Introduction

The Northern Beaches Young Writers' Competition is now in its sixteenth year. 'Change' is the eleventh e-Book to be published featuring finalists' stories, with 'Upside Down', 'Treehouse', 'Doorway', 'Tiny Door', 'Wild', 'Splash', 'Spark', 'Rise', 'Promise' and 'Crystal' published between 2015 - 2024.

2025 saw hundreds of original creative writing pieces submitted by talented students from Kindergarten to Year 12.

Using the hero word, 'Change', our young writers captivated and inspired us through stories about friendship, love, and war as characters navigated their way across fantasy realms, canyons, cliffs, polar bear chases and even teleportation to ancient temples and futuristic cities!

Each story highlighted the beauty and downfall of changing friendships and rivalries, and explored topics of family separation, bereavement, and new arrivals. As readers we witnessed the growth of life, the connection of health care to Country, the journey of a raindrop and the power of seedling to tree.

Among the eerie twists, fantasy worlds and innocence, we find the power of change. Whether it's a reflection or reframing of experiences, or in taking the metaphorical and literal courage to dance on the stage when you're not like others.

This competition would not be possible without our generous panel of professional writers, who gave up their time to undertake the challenging task of judging this year's competition. Our grateful thanks go to Debra Tidball, Nick Long, Nat Amore, Yvette Poshoglian, Pip Harry and Harry Cook. We also acknowledge the passion and support of the many teachers, school librarians and parents across the Northern Beaches who inspire a love of literacy and creativity in young people.

We would especially like to thank the hundreds of students who are changing the world with their creativity.

We hope you enjoy this transformative selection of creative pieces.

**Northern Beaches Council Library Service**



# About the Judges



**Debra Tidball**  
Kindergarten - Year 2 category

Debra Tidball is an award-winning author of picture books, short stories, poems and plays for children. With social work and children’s literature qualifications, Debra is a children’s book enthusiast with a particular passion for picture books and the profound way they can touch children’s lives. She is often distracted from her bookish activities by a very cheeky Italian Greyhound named Casper, who, like Little Dragon in her latest picture book, loves making mischief with toilet paper rolls!



**Nick Long**  
Years 3 - 4 category

Author, journalist, and television producer Nick Long has been up close and personal with deadly snakes, five-metre crocodiles, ruthless crime lords and unstable Alaskan glaciers. Believing that every adventure is a chance to expand the imagination, Nick’s junior fiction series *The Forbidden Journal of Rufus Rumble* takes readers on a hilarious and captivating journey through space. *Forbidden Journal of Rufus Rumble: Worst Space Crew Ever* is Nick’s first children’s book, with the sequel *Forbidden Journal of Rufus Rumble: Legend of the Fang* has just hit shelves in June 2025.



**Nat Amore**  
Years 5 - 6 category

Nat Amore is an award-winning internationally published author of children’s books - a good chunk of which have been written in our very own Northern Beaches Libraries! Her books include *Secrets of a Schoolyard Millionaire*, *The Power of Positive Pranking*, *The Right Way to Rock*, Graphic Novel *We Run Tomorrow* and the *Shower Land* series. Nat is passionate about encouraging kids to read, write and explore their imaginations without boundaries.



**Yvette Poshoglian**  
Years 7 - 8 category

Bestselling author of over 50 books for children and young readers, Yvette writes the wildly popular *Ella and Olivia* series, the *Puppy Diary* books and the *Frankie Fox Girl Spy* stories, and has written historical fiction including *My Australian Story: Escape from Cockatoo Island*. Her new book *Dear Greta* is out now.



**Pip Harry**  
Years 9 - 10 category

Award-winning author of children and young adults, Pip’s titles include *Because of You*, *The Little Wave*, *Are You There, Buddha?* and *August & Jones*. Her verse novel *The Little Wave* won the 2020 CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers, and the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Award (8-10 years). Her newest middle grade book, *August & Jones*, won the CBCA Shadow Judging Book of the Year 2023. Pip’s debut picture book *Over or Under?* is shortlisted for the ABIA Picture Book of the Year and is a CBCA Early Childhood Notable book. *The Inside Dog*, *Drift*, and *Camp Spooky: Attack of the Aliants* are all out in 2025. Pip is proud to call the Northern Beaches home and is a regular visitor to the local libraries to research, read and write.



**Harry Cook**  
Years 11 - 12 category

Harry Cook is a Northern Beaches local, an award-winning film, television, and theatre actor, writer, and LGBTQI+ activist. His writing credits includes his memoir, *Pink Ink*, two YA novels, *Fin & Rye & Fireflies* and *Felix Silver*, *Teaspoons & Witches*, and contributions to The Huffington Post, The Big Smoke, and The Guardian. He has starred in major film, TV and theatre productions, including working alongside such talents as Geena Davis and Sam Neill.

**Category 1**  
Kindergarten - Year 2

# The Nervous Ice Cream

By Mia Bennett

Year 1

## The Nervous Ice Cream



I want to go to school

BY Mia Bennett

Her Mum and dad  
Came into her Bedroom.  
"What's wrong Sprinkle?"  
"I don't want  
to go to School!"  
"Why?" asked Mum.  
"Because the teacher might  
be mean," said Sprinkle.  
Mum asked Sprinkle  
to get ready after  
she explained that the  
teacher ~~is~~ will be kind  
and helpful.



Once there was a  
nervous ice cream that was  
starting school. Her name  
was Sprinkle and she was  
strawberry flavoured.  
One warm sunny day  
She looks at the  
Calendar and shouted out  
"No!" She hated change  
and wanted to stay at  
home.



Mum helped Sprinkle  
Pack her Bag.  
Stuff  
that she needed:



BY Sprinkle



Half way to school Sprinkle realised she had forgotten her lunch box! She started to Cry.



Warm Wet tears dripped down her ice cream face. Soon she started to melt.



Sprinkle felt sick in her tummy and just

wanted to go home and hide in her Bedroom. Mum Zoomed home and grabbed the lunch box.

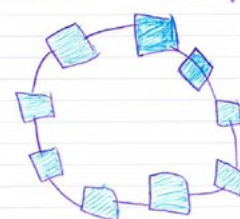


Sprinkle's mum gave her a big hug and persuaded her to get back into the car.

When she saw the giant school and all the perfect looking ice cream students she wanted to run away. She didn't like change and wanted to go back to her old daycare.



She also looked so different, all drippy and melted. Suddenly her buddy appeared "don't worry Sprinkle" She said, "I will help you today. Look, I made you an ice Bracelet!" "I Love it!" said Sprinkle.



Sprinkle's buddy walked her to class. Her teacher was called Miss Stardust and she had a huge smile on her face. She felt good wearing her bracelet and quickly made a new friend.



"Thank you."

Sprinkle's buddy explained that "the bracelet will stop you melting and help you if you are sad." Sprinkle feels thankful and better.



Sprinkle realised that Change can be good and sometimes even good fun!

The end



# Diary of a Chick - By Nugget

By Christopher Bai

Year 2

## Day 1

"It's dark. It's warm. Something is moving... Am I alive?"

Hello, I am a chick, and I feel a bit scared. Suddenly, something delicious drops into my mouth. My eyes are slowly opening! I realise I'm in an egg! The yellow thing is the yolk. Patches of sunlight are seeping through the shell. I decide to break the eggshell and explore what lies beyond.

## Day 2

Crack! "Ouch!" I am very busy breaking my egg. I've had enough yolk to move and open my eyes. I've been striking my eggshell with my egg tooth.

Yay! I've finally shattered the eggshell! I'm in a cage. One of the people outside gazes deeply into my eyes. I stare back, barely blinking.

I've made my first friend. To me, he is gigantic, but I don't care.

## Day 4

More chicks hatched this morning. I have siblings now!

I've been named Nugget. My sister Chihey is soft yellow and incredibly fluffy. My friend, the boy named Chris, has been taking lots of photos of us. I think he's making a diary about us.

## Day 7

Chris is creating a diary about us. Today, he measured me. I'm now 11 cm tall!

## Day 8

I know Chris way better now. He always brings snacks, and sometimes I pretend to peep extra loudly so he'll notice me. He giggles when I wobble toward him.

"This is the last week of the chicks." That's Mrs. Stone, Chris's teacher. When I hear her say that, my little heart sinks.

## Day 11

Chris is doing really well at learning! I can see him getting nearly everything right. I'm still sad, though.

## Day 14

Today is our last day at St. Luke's. It's also the last day of working on chick diaries. I tried saying bye, but humans can't understand chicken language.

I see Chris waving, and I wave my wing back. He's gazing into my eyes, just like when we first met. I remember that moment clearly — his face pressed to the glass, mine sticky with yolk and wonder.

I also say "happy birthday" in my mind to Chris. In three days, he'll turn 8.

I'm ready to start my new life at the farm, and I know he's ready to be 8. Things are changing, but that's okay. We're both on the journey of growing up, just in different places now.

# Sam and the Snowy Portal Adventure

By Josh Asigno

Year 2

One morning, ten year old Sam opened his eyes and gasped.

## Snow?

He was outside, lying in the snow! No bed, no room, no blanket. Just cold, soft snowflakes.

"Muuuum?" he called out. No answer.

Then, just around the corner... **a polar bear!**

Before Sam could scream, he heard something else: **a child's cry!**

"Eddy!" he gasped. His little brother!

But before Sam could move, the polar bear started to chase him!

"WHAAH!" Sam ran through the snow as fast as he could, slipping and sliding, until he found a burrow and ducked inside.

It was quiet.

He finally had time to think.

## What is this place?

Was it another world? Had something changed? Maybe his world had turned into this one?

Then there it was again: **Eddy's cry!**

Sam peeked out of the burrow and saw a cave with tall, sparkly dripstones. Inside the cave... **Eddy!**

Sam ran to him, but something shimmered in the distance.

**A canyon**, with a soft blue light glowing at the bottom.

He knew it. That light meant something.

He picked up Eddy and carried him on his shoulders. "Hang on, buddy," he whispered.

They made it to the canyon's edge, but it was steep.

Sam sat down, his legs dangling. "If only I could get down..."

Then he noticed: his feet weren't dangling in the air anymore. They were standing on something. **A glass bridge!**

Carefully, Sam tiptoed across it with Eddy. At the end was a cliff and there, hidden in a big rock, was something strange...

## A locker?

He opened it. **A parachute!**

Sam strapped it on, holding Eddy tight.

"One... two... three... JUMP!"

## Woooooooosh!

They soared through the sky, down to the glowing blue light.

## The portal!

They landed right in front of it. Sam stepped through...

And suddenly they were back!

At the mall. Right near Mum's house. But there was a voice over the speakers:

## "Missing boy alert, ten years old..."

Sam didn't wait. He ran to his mum's house, Eddy still in his arms.



He knocked on the door.  
It opened.

**“MUM!!”**

She hugged them both tight.

And that night, safe and warm, Sam whispered to Eddy: **“Best. Day. Ever.”**

**The End.**

# Invasion

By Joey Shen

Year 2

It was the 5th of May, 1945. I was walking down a street on a quiet afternoon when the ground unexpectedly cracked beneath me! I fell through a strange glowing hole and tumbled into darkness. When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in my world—I had been teleported to ancient China!

But something felt wrong. The streets were empty. No one was around. I wandered into a broken-down temple and found a glowing chest in the corner. Inside, I found a set of shiny silver armor, some scrolls, and a note. The note said:

“Run! The beast is near! We’re hiding near the Great Wall. You must stop it before it finds us!”

My heart was racing. A beast? I didn’t even know how I arrived here, but I knew I had to do something. I grabbed the map inside the chest, and suddenly, a strong brown horse trotted up to me like it was waiting. I hopped on and began the journey to find this beast.

When I finally found its cave, bones and broken warning signs covered the ground. The air smelled like smoke and dust. I stepped inside and saw it.

The beast was terrifying. It had the body of a lion, massive dragon wings, and a long tail that moved like a snake. Its red eyes glowed in the dark, and smoke came from its nostrils. I froze—but then I remembered the spear on my back.

I knew what I had to do. I grabbed the spear, aimed carefully, and threw it straight into the beast’s chest.

Instantly, everything changed.

A blinding light filled the cave, and when it faded, I was standing in the middle of a giant futuristic city. Cars zoomed through the air, buildings reached the clouds, and robots walked beside people.

At first, I didn’t know where I was. But then I looked around carefully and realised—it was my old town, just hundreds of years in the future. I could even see the same hill I used to play on, now covered in glass towers.

I had traveled not only to the past... but also to the future.

## Category 2

Year 3 - 4

## The Drop of Life

By Georgia Greenwell

Year 4

Clouds gather across the vast sky forming a bridge, blocking the sun from any chance of escaping, as if it was captured. Birds fly away to a tropical island; bees return to their hives; even flowers tuck into themselves. Ever since it was midnight there have been clouds in the sky, as if there was an army about to invade. The clouds grow nearer and nearer. All fell silent, midday came, and no one was around...well...all but two.

A mum and her newborn baby scuttled about the town as if they did not know where they were. The time had come, everyone will remember this storm, but no one will remember that it started with a single raindrop.

The raindrop was not like the others, for this raindrop was frightened. All the other raindrops were pushing it out. There it was only hanging on by the tip of its wateriness. Then down. Down. Down. Traumatized the poor little thing willingly needed safety. Forty feet down, no hope. Thirty feet down, no hope. Then golden curly locks caught its eye, if only it could if only it could land. A mother and her baby were still around. Trying to push its way to them. Five feet down SPLASH. The raindrop landed swiftly in that bundle of softly spun gold.

Relieved, the raindrop relaxed a bit into that warm Baby's hair, as if it had just found a pile of golden cotton candy. As the raindrop started to pay attention it saw the beautiful baby's eyes were a gentle touch of olive green. The Baby started smiling as if it knew the raindrop was there, then giggling as the mum found shelter.

All through the storm the raindrop thought about the baby and the happiness she felt. And it thought the baby will always stand tall even in the toughest times and she will always stand up for others. So, with that the raindrop said 'I will cherish that beautiful baby girl with all that I am' as it evaporated delicately back up into the clouds. Forever changed.

After that day they will meet again throughout her life, even though the girl might not see the raindrop they will always stay connected. One time, under the hot Rome sun, the raindrop will be guzzled down when the green-eyed girl is gathering aqua clear water from an ancient bubbler. And another, skiing and swishing on the soft, silent, snow the raindrop in the form of a snowflake will dance on to the little girl's tongue as it melts. Trickling down her throat as f she poured a magic liquid in her mouth. But the best bit of all is their connection will never change. As that's how it ought to be.



# Emeralds and Diamonds

By Rose Hastie

Year 3

“Bang, bang, bang!” I looked for a place to land, but there was none. Bullets whizzed around my plane like a dragon spitting out flames. Dark clouds stretched out their fingers. It was hopeless. Four days of training wasn’t enough - I barely knew what some of the buttons did! Suddenly a queer whirring sound blasted into my ears. I decided to change gear, but nothing happened. I strained my neck and then I saw it. A German fighter jet looking straight at me. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out. I was petrified. If I didn’t do something soon, I was a dead man.

No, I wasn’t going to give up, so I did the only thing left to do - I pressed the closest button, yelled and everything went black...

Suddenly there were sounds, muffled voices - people! “Where am I?” I called out. “You’re in a hospital” a gentle voice replied. My eyes ached. “Why am I here?”, I called out again. The same caring voice answered me, “You are here because you were shot down and the impact badly damaged your eyes.” I let out a deep sigh. “But”, she continued, “if you stay in hospital, an American Doctor believes he can heal you.”

Finally, I asked the question I had been wanting to ask the moment I had first heard her voice. “What’s your name?” There was a pause and my face felt hot and I wondered what she was thinking and what she thought of me. Then, the voice replied, “Alice. My name is Alice.”

After that, Alice and her kind voice travelled to my bedside every day. It came with soft hands that would gently pull up the covers and grip my hands when my eyes ached terribly. Sometimes she would describe what else was happening in the hospital. Listening to her, became my new way of seeing things.

I wanted to tell her how I loved her, but I kept on stopping myself. Suddenly it was time and she wheeled my bed down to the operating theatre. There was a whirring sound, and I was out...

Sounds, muffled voices - Alice! I could hear the familiar sound of her soft voice. She came right up close to me this time and took a deep breath and said “I love you, Jim. Everything is going to be okay.”

I turned towards her voice and my eyes filled with tears, but my heart leapt with joy. “Once I am well, Alice, will you marry me?” The next words I heard – I’ll never forget, for they made me the happiest man in the world. “Yes, Jim, I will.”

8th of May 1945  
(VE day)

“Dear Mother and Father,

I love you and I miss you. I can’t wait to see you. I was shot down by a German fighter jet over the south of France and my eyes were terribly damaged. I must have come down somewhere in Provence and was rescued by a lavender farmer, who is in the Resistance. He took me, unconscious, to the closest British military hospital. I will never be able to repay him for his kindness to me - a stranger. An American surgeon – Dr Frederick Cooper, managed to save my eyes – and now I can see after months of seeing nothing.

But there’s more!

I am engaged to Alice Margaret Jones, the English nurse who cared for me in hospital. She is like emeralds and diamonds to me. I know you will love her.

Love always,

Your youngest son,

Jim

# 2 Homes

By Laura Holden

Year 3

One day, I came downstairs not knowing my life was about to change. I was a happy girl of 8, rosy cheeks, pretty dresses and always bouncing about with my parents. It seemed like a normal breakfast, but you could tell, there was tension in the air. It felt like there had been an argument before. Mum and Dad weren’t making any eye contact. We sat there in icy silence, not even attempting any small talk, I had a feeling in my gut that something was not right.

I had to leave the house, my head was full of confusion and anger but at school it wasn’t much better. There was a group of girls who kept calling me “Big-headed Brat” because the teacher said “Wow! Very impressive Ella”. I wanted to tell my parents but same story as the morning, they wouldn’t talk to me at all. I have a suspicion that this might be serious. I decide to listen to their conversation when they think im sleeping, eyes closed, heavy breathing and all. That’s my plan!

Three hours later...Arghhhhhhhh!!! My worst fear has come true. My parents are getting divorced!!! I overheard them saying...

“When do you think we are going to tell Ella about the divorce?” Questioned Dad.

“I don’t know but she is going to be heartbroken. Everything is going to change for her” replied Mum, concerned.

“You’re getting a divorce? Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!”

2 days later...

I’m still lying in bed, crying half heartedly. I’m packing my things to go to Dad’s new house for the weekend, His new house is just around the block, but it is still so different.

2 houses, 2 beds, 2 bedrooms, 2 Homes.

I lug my suitcase out of the front door and hop into the car.

Dads House

I step into Dad’s new house with a heavy heart. I rush upstairs to my bed and jump onto the soft comfortable bed, Wow. On my calendar it says ‘quality time’ every single weekend I stay with him. Amazing I rarely get quality time with my Dad. I sigh. I realise how much time and effort dad must have put into these times we have together! Maybe things won’t be so bad here after all!!!

The end.



## Stella and Scales

By Mia Jones

Year 4

In the dragon realm the sun was just rising and the flowers were dancing in the wind, the dragons were sleeping in their caves and a dragon named Scales was getting ready for people hunting school. However, Scales was always picked on because she doesn't think it's a good thing to hunt humans, the other dragons would call her names and she never made friends.

Meanwhile back on Earth it was another difficult day at school for Stella who loves dragons.

**"Dragon nerd!"** mocked some of the kids in the grade.

**"Dragons aren't even real."** yelled one of the kids.

**"Are too!"** cried Stella trying to hold back her tears, and with that she ran to her class.

When Stella got home she broke into tears, she lost her appetite and she didn't feel like saying hi to her dog. She just lay on her bed crying until she felt the ground starting to shake. She got up and looked around and saw that one of her favourite dragon figures was glowing, then the soft carpet under her feet turned into grass, and the strangest thing of all was that there was a giant building that read welcome back students; but this didn't look like her school at all! **"Was this a dream?"** thought Stella.

The giant stone building had big, heavy doors and when she got in there was hundreds of different sorts of dragons. Their scales were different colours, some were fiery red and some were ocean blue and others were emerald green; and every dragon had a pair of horns on their head. Some dragons had fire running down their backs while others had icicles on their chin. All of the dragons had sharp teeth and powerful claws, beady eyes and big wings. Some were little and some were big. It was magnificent. but luckily before they spotted Stella Scales quickly scooped her up.

**"Don't worry, you're safe with me."** Stella gave Scales a scared look.

**"I am Scales and this is the dragon realm. How did you get in here?"** Stella didn't know what to say so she just shrugged.

**"Okay we need to get you out of here as dragons hunt your kind"** Scales placed Stella on her back and they flew to the forest.

It was a magical place with animals she had never seen, and plants she had never encountered. The mushrooms were huge and the trees were glowing! While Scales was showing her around they started talking. Scales explained that her kind despise humans and Stella explained that humans don't believe in dragons.

**"This is ridiculous!"** they both said at the same time and were frustrated. In the evening they went stargazing and flew around the night sky of the dragon realm, they started to bond and form a friendship.

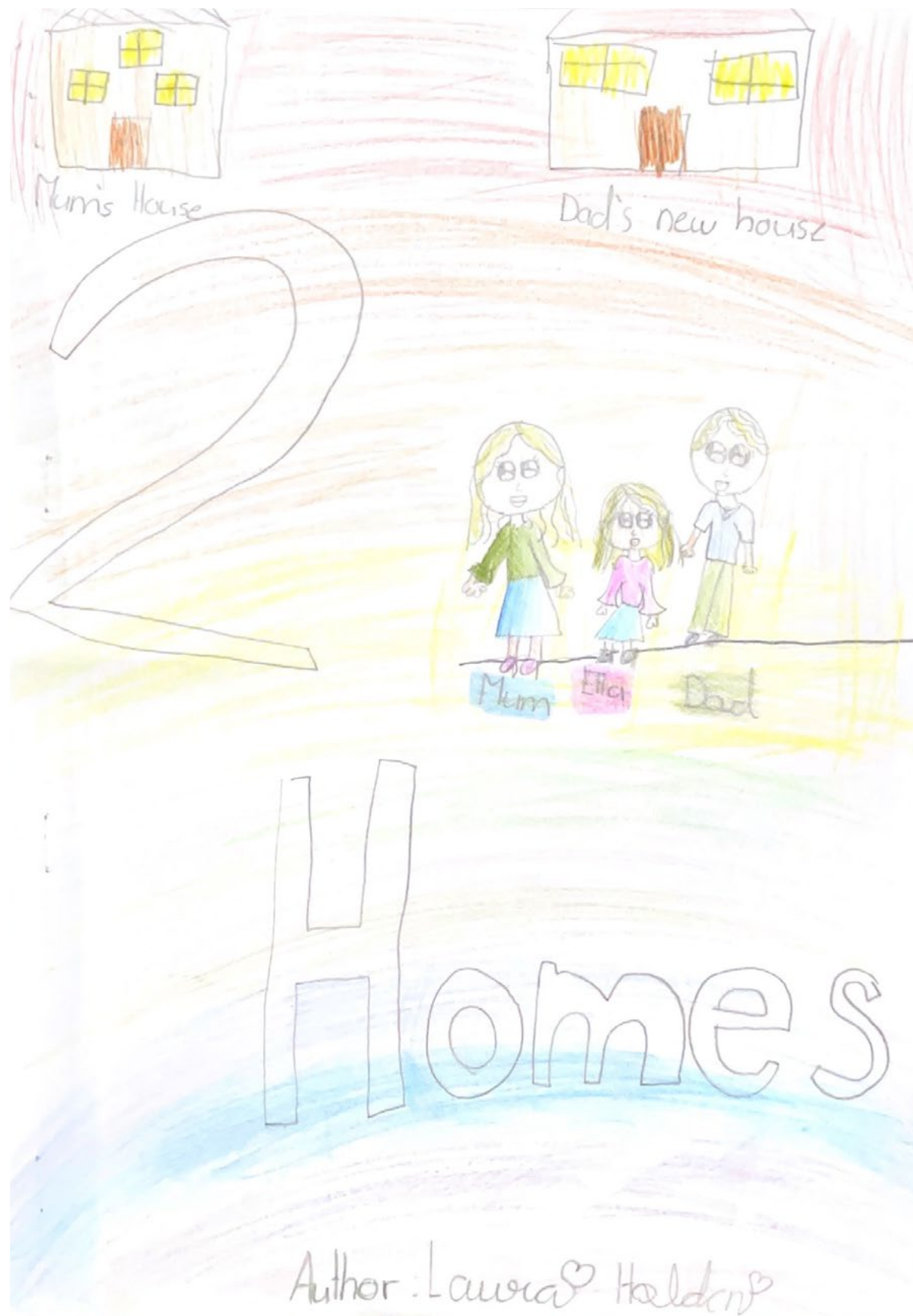
They found a cozy cave and camped there for the night. As the sun started to rise Stella found her pocket glowing, it was her dragon figurine.

**"I think I need to go home now"**, sobbed Stella **"But I promise to figure out a way to get back and see you!"**

While saying their goodbyes the new friends made a pact to find a way to change how dragons and humans think of and feel about each other.

As Stella hugged Scales one more time, the forest surrounding her started to transform back into her bedroom.

Back in her bedroom Stella took out her figurine and placed it in a safe place. **"I better start figuring out how to get back."**



Category 3

Year 5 - 6

Are you Listening?

By Maya Gaffney

Year 6

I noticed it first before the rest of the world did.

I can speak with words, I just prefer not to. My eyes can tell entire stories. I like sitting outside in the grass with my fingers twitching in patterns. Other people say I am lost in my own world, but I am not, I am listening. The wind speaks a language older than time, the trees are whispering, and the clouds carry messages. I can feel the heartbeat of the earth like a drum under my feet. Where others see a beach and the sky, I see a thousand tiny signals: how the foam gathers, how the seagulls' wingbeats sound, how the waves slosh against the soft sand. I keep detailed logs in my Earth Diary. This is how I make sense of the chaos around me.

One day, I saw it.

Change.

The tide was retreating in an unusual curl, as if the ocean was trying to hold something in. The crabs were marching the wrong way, toward land. The seagulls circled lower, screeching not in hunger but in warning. The wind shifted, carrying with it a faint melody, like a lullaby sung by the universe.

I dropped to my knees and pulled out my two-in-one salt meter and thermometer I got for my birthday - the numbers were off.

Ocean temperature: 3.2 degrees higher than average.

Salinity: lower than it should be.

Wind direction: reversed.

My brain began to hum with a familiar feeling: the sensation of a pattern emerging. This was nothing ordinary. It was connected to other anomalies I had logged for months. It was the bees I had tracked not pollinating in time with the blooms. It was those fish I had never seen before in these waters, it was the whales migrating weeks early.

I didn't need anyone to tell me. I knew: the Earth was unravelling. Not suddenly, but in a slow, consistent shift, it was barely noticeable. Unless you were me, unless your brain was tuned to frequencies others didn't hear. Like a special radio a spy might use.

I can hyperfocus for hours, it's my superpower. I stayed up many nights piecing the data together. I have always been sensitive - emotionally and physically. Bright lights and loud sounds drive me crazy. But that also means I notice subtle shifts in tone and rhythm, in ecosystems and energy. While others are distracted, I feel the planet's fever. And most of all, I have empathy. Not always expressed in typical ways, but deep and unwavering. I just want to save the planet. I can feel its suffering. The Earth was calling out, not in distress, but in a plea for understanding. It was reaching out to me, to those who could listen beyond the surface noise.

I approached my mum to share my ideas. As I spoke, tears welled in her eyes. Words were gushing out of my mouth like a dam breaking free. "You must tell school, she urged, "it's the best place to start." Although I had just spoken to my mum, I was not sure if I could speak in front of the entire school. But remembering the way my mum looked at me with those hopeful eyes made me build up enough courage to ask my principal. Before I knew it, I was standing on stage at a school assembly reading my notes aloud. At first everyone seemed genuinely concerned, but as I was explaining the changes I'd found, my arch nemesis Danny stood up. The blood drained from my face as all eyes turned to him. "Why would you believe this dork?", he declared. "I don't think he's said a word since the beginning of the year, surely nothing goes on inside that head of his, am I right?" The hall immediately erupted in laughter. Yes, I was humiliated but also ignited. That evening, I sat at my computer, typing with renewed determination.

# Crumpet’s Little Story

By Emma Kate Cooper

Year 5

I whimpered softly to myself as the fluffy, newborn husky puppy in the kennel next door got his adoption card and started to bark like mad. I tried to cover my ears with my paws, but since I am a dachshund, my legs are too stubby to do anything except for walking.

These are a few things you should know about me: I am 12 years old, and I came to the shelter two years ago because my previous owners were too busy working in the city to play with me. My name is Crumpet and my kennel-mate is an old British Bulldog called Athena, who is a bit on the chubby side. (*What? Everyone is always telling me to be honest.*)

Anyway, here is how my story begins: after exactly two years, three weeks, six days and five hours of being at the shelter, a very elderly couple with walking sticks peered into my kennel. I was chanting *please don't be me, please don't be me*, in my tiny head for the first time in my long life. They just didn't seem to click with my vibe.

*Hey, I might be old, but I like a good dance party once in a while.* I was relieved when they finally moved on and hobbled to the exit.

Another family came by, a loud couple with a billion kids. I thought of all the hands and voices squabbling and grabbing and cringed. I was surprised they had enough room in their family for a dog, and even more surprised they chose a puppy, which needs a lot of work.

Then, I saw a woman. She had crinkly eyes and a magical smile. Her frizzy grey hair had hot pink streaks, and she was wearing a lot of jangly bangles and bracelets. Little did I know, she was about to change my life forever.

She was talking to the person at the front desk. I could only hear snippets of their conversation, “I want her to be old-ish...kind of small...likes dance parties.”

My tail started wagging so fast, I thought I was going to lift off like a helicopter. She peered into my kennel, and the receptionist read out my file. “Hmmm...looks like she’s small...12 years old...oooh, loves dancing!”

“She’s perfect!” said the lady. “What’s her name?”

“Crumpet,” the receptionist answered.

“Ooh, I love Crumpets!” she exclaimed with delight.

The lady, whose name is Linda, brought me home the very next day. She got me a pretty bed by the fireplace and a spotty retractable leash. We went on so many walks. And I tried to be on my

best behaviour with her, but the new area had so many wonderful smells and I got really excited when I saw the other dogs. We even had dance parties every week!

One day, I met a handsome beagle and we had a great time sniffing each other’s backsides. I saw him again the next day, and he told me his name was Charming. I must admit, I had a major crush on him. With those long ears, baggy skin and blood-red eyes, what’s not to love about him?

Anyway, on the third day, I asked Charming if he had a girlfriend – and he wanted me to be his! Of course, I said no. Just kidding! I totally said yes. We went to the park together and goo-goo eyed each other for a couple of minutes, then ran around while our humans talked. At the end, we laid down together and panted a lot.

Two years later, I had 12 little puppies. The experience was painful, but they are really adorable and definitely worth it. I named them Millie, Lilly, Billie, Silly, Trilly, Frilly, Dilly, Gillie, Hillie, Jilly, Nilly and Pilly since they were all identical, except for Frilly, who only had three legs. She was my favourite, and I always cuddled her close at all times.

Years later, I stood at the podium of the Global Environmental Summit, addressing leaders from around the world. Behind me, a banner read: “The Earth Whispers. Will You Listen?”

I spoke of the subtle signs, the retreating tides, the erratic bird migrations, the shifting winds, that had once been dismissed as anomalies. I shared how, by tuning into these whispers, we could predict and prevent environmental crises.

The room was silent as I concluded, “The Earth has always spoken to us. It’s time we learned to listen.”

As I stepped down, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was my mum, her eyes filled with pride. “You did it,” she whispered.

Now, I turn to you. The Earth is still whispering, still sending its messages.

Will you listen?



# The Destination

By Abigail McCabe

Year 6

In front of the gloomy, dusty convenience store, the bus rattled to a halt. The only things that mattered to James were peeling paint, buzzing fluorescent lights, and a crooked grubby OPEN sign falling off the hinges.

He stepped off the bus, covering his eyes from the sun. He had a dead cold phone. He could feel coins in his pocket clinking together. He reached and retrieved the coins and one crumpled five-dollar bill. Quickly, he counted: \$5.88. He hoped it would be enough for a sandwich and maybe a drink.

As he stepped inside, the bell above the door jingled. Without raising her gaze from her magazine, a young woman behind the counter nodded respectably. He found a pre-packaged turkey sandwich in the back of the refrigerator that was a little misshapen and took out a cold bottle of water. He stopped as he got closer to the counter in front of a coin-operated vending machine that was scratched up and had graffiti covering it, faded and smudged, it had stains on it and old gum along the bottom. This vending machine you would usually find it in a grubby sketchy alleyway. It spat out tiny plastic capsules saying, "Change your fortune-\$1" written in faded red letters on a sticker on the front. He chuckled because it reminded him of fortune cookies. James stared at it with curiosity. Sitting there like a relic from an old movie, the machine seemed out of place. Tiny toys, fortunes, and trinkets were among its contents. Surely a joke, right?

Nevertheless, he felt a pull to take a capsule. He took one dollar out of his pocket. Why not? What the worst that could happen? He turned the handle after dropping the coins into the slot. It fell into the tray with a clunk.

He opened it.

There was a folded piece of paper inside. Written in messy, slanted characters with a cryptic message, "You can't escape your final destination!" James froze. The woman behind the counter glanced at him. "You okay?"

He nodded quickly, dropping his head down and stuffing the paper into his jacket feeling uncomfortable. "Yeah. Just... surprised it wasn't gum or something."

He sat on the curb and unwrapped the sandwich, but he wasn't hungry anymore; he had lost his appetite. The words echoed in his mind... "You can't escape your final destination." What did that mean? But he was tired. It had been a long day, and he did not want to think about it. The message felt personal. Too personal. Was it a coincidence or something more?

He stared at the sky. He felt as if someone was sending him a message. He looked at the street. It was 6:30pm according to the convenience store clock, and it was already getting dark, shops were closing for the night, the pizzeria was full of people. A scent was travelling on the wind filling him up with a warm and fuzzy feeling. A rush of cold air travelled up his spine which was weird considering the night was still and he had a pretty warm jacket on. He looked around and the people suddenly disappeared and he was the only one in the night. The alleyways concealed hooded figures and he felt uneasy in his tummy. In the dark, all alone, James was in danger. Something was gunning for him, but the problem was he did not know what it was. For a second he remembered the fortune message: You can't escape your final destination! He started to feel paranoid and queasy. Could this be more than a harmless message? The adrenaline in his body was rushing to his head. There was a storm of terrifying thoughts in his mind growing grimmer by the minute.

He clamped his teeth together and turned around slowly to see a lean, dark figure in the middle of the street staring at him. He was holding a sharp staff and an ominous cloud of darkness surrounded him. It was impossible to see the person's face. It was as if inside that cloak there was nothing, like a ghost. James was frozen with shock. He looked around him for an escape route but there was nothing and when he looked back again to locate the figure, it was gone. Vanished. His heart was thumping in his chest so hard.

They grew up way too fast and after a couple of months, they were already playing around with each other. I knew they had to leave. The first to go were the bigger, stronger ones – Dilly and Billie. I tried to stop Linda from taking them, but she just patted my head and moved me to the side.

But when someone tried to take Frilly, I stood my guard. They tried to move me, but I was not moving. I bit them on the hand and went to protect Frilly. I couldn't let her go. I just couldn't.

At last, they left and Linda reassured me that Frilly could stay. I twirled and my tail wagged with my little pup hopping alongside me, never missing a beat. But this time we were not just dancing – we were celebrating.

The End.

# The Clockmaker’s Change

By Kiana O’Farrell

Year 6

The streetlights started to flicker and in the corners of his eye everything was glitching. There it was again - the cold breeze down his spine. Someone was behind him. He slowly turned on his heel and faced the figure again in the middle of the road under the flickering streetlights. and all the figure said was, “Hello, James, I’ve been looking for you...”

In a small village nestled between green hills and golden fields, there was a curious little shop with ticking sounds echoing from its wooden walls. Above the door hung a crooked sign that read: *Tobias Clock’s Timepieces*. Inside the shop lived Tobias, an old clockmaker with silver hair like spider webs and a kind smile hidden behind his beard.

Tobias was famous for fixing any clock: big or small, new or ancient. But what made him special wasn't just his skill. However, Tobias had a secret: some of his clocks could do more than tell time. They could *change* it.

No one believed the rumors, of course. “A clock that can change time?” people chuckled loudly. “Nonsense!” But eleven year old Elsie didn’t think it was nonsense at all.

Elsie was a year 6 student who lived just down the street and often visited Tobias after school. She loved watching him work, listening to the ticking of a hundred clocks all around the shop. But lately, she came for another reason. She needed a change.

Her life at school had become miserable. Her best friend had moved away, her teacher was strict, and some kids had started picking on her. Every day felt the same, like a scratched record repeating the worst parts.

One rainy afternoon, Elsie burst into the shop, tears on her cheeks.

“Tobias,” she whispered, “I wish I could change everything. Just go back and fix things.”

Tobias paused, his hands resting on the open back of a cuckoo clock. He looked at her, eyes twinkling behind thick glasses.

“Change is tricky,” he said gently. “It doesn’t always work the way we expect. But... maybe there’s a way to help.”

He disappeared into the back of the shop and returned with a small clock no bigger than a lunchbox. Its golden hands shimmered and a tiny silver dial sat beneath the face, marked with strange symbols.

“This,” Tobias said, “is the Clock of Change. It doesn’t move you through time, but it changes how you see it.”

Elsie blinked surprisingly. “That sounds very confusing.”

Tobias chuckled. “It is. But sometimes, we don’t need the world to change. We need to change ourselves.”

He handed it to her carefully. “Try it. But only when you’re ready.”

That night, Elsie stared at the clock on her desk. It ticked quietly, the silver dial glowing softly. She turned it once to the right, and suddenly, the world blurred.

When it cleared, she was standing in the school hallway, watching herself sitting alone at lunch. But something was different. She wasn’t sad. She was drawing funny cartoons on a napkin, smiling to herself.

Then another turn.

*Click.*

She saw the day she and her old friend had said goodbye. But this time, instead of crying, she was hugging her friend tightly and saying, “I’ll write to you every week.” Her friend smiled back, pinky swearing it.

One more click, and she saw the mean kids teasing her. But instead of staying silent, she calmly said, “That’s not kind,” and walked away with her head high. Behind her, one of the boys looked sorry.

With each turn, the Clock of Change didn't change the past. It changed *how she remembered it*. It showed her the strength she hadn't seen in herself.

The next morning, Elsie returned to school with the clock in her backpack and some courage in her heart.

At lunch, she sat near a girl who always read books alone. "Hey," Elsie said. "Want to see something cool?" She pulled out her sketchbook and began drawing silly animals. The girl giggled, and soon they were laughing together.

In class, Elsie raised her hand more, even when she wasn't sure of the answer. She still got some things wrong, but the teacher smiled at her effort.

And when the bullies came around again, she remembered the vision from the clock. She stood tall and said, "You can't ruin my day."

Something had changed, and it wasn't magic. It was *her*.

That weekend, Elsie returned the clock to Tobias.

"I don't think I need it anymore," she said proudly.

Tobias smiled and nodded. "Real change," he said, "comes from within."

From that day on, Elsie still had hard days like everyone does but she faced them with courage, kindness, and a little bit of laughter. And sometimes, when she passed the clockmaker's shop, she thought she saw the silver dial of the Clock of Change spinning all on its own.

**Category 4**  
Year 7 - 8



# Silent Strings

By Moana Chujo

Year 7

Inside a silver stage that glistened in light and attention, an iron stage draped in crimson velvet curtains set place. Dancing on the stage were glass ballerinas. Each of them were identical in shape and size, though each would glitter and shimmer in their own ways like diamond dust. They would prance around the stage, twirling like crystal butterflies dancing to a song built from silence and respect. Their glass hair were tightened into a bun and their tutus sprung outwards like a blossoming flower. They were see-through in a way that made them mesmerising and magnetic. Hypnotised eyes drew to them like moths to an attractive inferno.

There, hiding from the spotlight and blending into the shadows was a wooden marionette. Her body was made entirely from birch trees. Nothing similar to all the glass ballerinas. She wished to dance on the iron stage as well, but they would never let her. She couldn't understand why they wouldn't let her but she guessed it was because they thought a wooden doll can't do ballet as well as pretty ballerinas can.

So they bullied her. The once ecstatic and energetic marionette turned into a broken down doll with no purpose in life. Like a star that had burned out from being in such a close proximity to the sun. Her birch body became heavy and it was as if being alive was a burden.

The ballerinas knew they were gorgeous and showed it off as often as they could. They would polish their glass tutus and strut around. The marionette watched with a bitter expression, wishing that she was born a glass ballerina too.

There in the audience full of timber soldiers and plastic princesses, she saw a porcelain violinist. She carried a spruce and maple violin in her arms with the bow tightly wrapped around her delicate fingers. Her bright and rich white hair cascaded down her back like an elegant waterfall despite it being carelessly tossed to one side. Her dress was the same shade as her dark red lipstick—a bold choice for someone who looked so meek and gentle. Her eyes glowed with the same passion the marionette once had when she first started dancing.

The eye contact was short but it was all the violinist needed to send shivers straight through the marionette. Soon the show was over and the marionette forgot all about the violinist and new thoughts came into view.

When the night had fallen and the darkest and most alarming thoughts had crept into the marionette's mind, she wondered how it would feel to be a ballerina too. She imagined a world where she didn't have to practise in the dead of night once everyone else had gone home. She would be welcomed and loved. She was willing to risk everything and who she was if it meant being recognised and basking in the light of attention she desperately craved. She didn't want to change herself like she wanted tiramisu and sweet perfume. She wanted to change the way snow leopards are willing to eat themselves when starving—Not because she wanted to, but because she needed to.

The stage would host another concert in the middle of the night, which meant the marionette wouldn't be able to go practice there. The night was still young, so the marionette was unable to sleep. She decided she would take a look at the concert to refresh her mind.

The stage was dark, the audience was empty, and despite that, the violinist was there, playing on her own. It seemed as if all her other band members had ditched her after realising how empty the audience was. The violinist played with a somber emotion, the melodies of the violin strong and warm.

In a surge of complete instinct, the marionette climbed onto the stage to start doing ballet as well. The violinist noticed but didn't object, in fact, she started playing a classical ballet tune that melted into the marionette's dance.

The marionette moved around as freely as she wished to despite no-one in the audience to cheer for her once she's done. The light bounced off her wooden skin like a warm fireplace. She pranced and jumped and hit on pointes until her head spun with adrenaline. The dust in the air made her loopy and the spotlight was too bright for her eyes but she loved it.

The addicting spotlight was too much for her, like a morphine rush that went straight into her veins rather than her mind. Tears formed through her eyes and rushed down. She truly would never dance upon this stage again for she doesn't belong.

Maybe it was for the better though.

A broken marionette, forgotten, and destroyed by society.

# The Currency of Memory

By Jeana Shen

Year 7

We spent the entire morning counting coins at the kitchen table. Our pennies clinked softly like raindrops while we sorted lazily, as scattered and dull as copper confetti. Change was gathered and stacked into neat towers, ready to be rolled by our parents and exchanged for crisp notes at the bank.

Each stack felt satisfying, tangible proof of spent hours. My impatient brother built unstable nickel fortresses and grumbled about unfair distribution. I just smiled, arranging my coins and enjoying the order.

Sunlight lit dust motes above the lemon-scented table. It was a familiar ritual, a summer's end lull.

The rolled coins would transform into luxury items: a backpack, a game. To me, they felt like treasure, unearthed from forgotten places, representing time, effort, and family. Stacking was my quiet empire; my brother envisioned architectural wonders destined to crumble at his hand. It never came to fruition. His mounting frustration was partly about my competence and my patience, which he lacked. He preferred FLASH, BOOM BANG. I preferred silent accumulation.

He'd steal coins for 'structural support,' knowing his creations would collapse. He'd return, sheepish, for more.

Our silence held sibling understanding, etched into the table. Coins were our common ground. He brought chaos; I provided grounding.

He'd distract me with riddles, then return to building, breaking, borrowing.

As the afternoon faded, the metallic scent intensified. We worked side-by-side, our shared task binding us. The ordered coins reflected our differences and enduring bond.

The lemon scent began to fade, replaced by the sharper, metallic tang that clung to our fingertips. The towers grew taller, my stacks precise and gleaming, his precarious and leaning precariously close to the edge of the table. His frustration simmered, a low, constant hum beneath the clinking coins. I could sense a storm brewing.

He was a human seismograph, registering the potential for disaster long before it struck. I braced myself, though I knew predicting the precise moment of his eruption was impossible. It was like waiting for a pot to boil - you knew it would happen, but not exactly when, or with what ferocity.

He finally slammed his fist on the table, the unstable nickel fortress collapsing in a metallic avalanche. "It's not fair!" he yelled, the coins scattering like frightened mice. He glared at my neat stacks, resentment radiating off him like heat from a furnace.

"What's not fair?" I asked, keeping my voice even. I knew arguing would only escalate things, but ignoring him would be interpreted as smugness, an equally dangerous provocation.

"You always get more!" he accused, pointing a finger at my stacks. "You're always better at this!"

I sighed. This was the script we always followed. "I don't get more," I said patiently. "I just... sort more. I'm not stealing coins to build crumbling towers."

He flushed, his cheeks burning a brighter red than the pennies we'd sorted. "I'm not stealing! I'm... innovating!"

"Innovating?" I raised an eyebrow, trying to suppress a smile.

"Yeah! Like... architectural innovation! You wouldn't understand." He crossed his arms, retreating into a sulky silence.

I knew better than to push. Instead, I slowly, deliberately, began to rebuild his ruined fortress. I scooped up the scattered nickels, one by one, and carefully placed them back on the base, reinforcing the weak points with extra coins.

He watched me, his anger slowly deflating like a punctured balloon. He didn't say thank you, of course, but I saw the flicker of gratitude in his eyes.

Once the fortress was restored to its former, precarious glory, I pushed it back towards him. "Here," I said quietly. "Try to make it stronger this time."

He looked at the fortress, then at me, then back at the fortress. He tentatively reached out and, instead of knocking it down, carefully added another layer of nickels to the top.

For a while, we worked in silence again, the only sound the gentle clinking of coins. He was still restless, his fingers drumming against the table, but the simmering frustration had subsided, replaced by a fragile truce.

The afternoon light deepened, casting long shadows across the table. The metallic scent hung heavy in the air, a shared aroma of labor and sibling rivalry. The stacks grew taller, a testament to our differing approaches and our intertwined destinies.

As twilight approached, a different scent began to permeate the air. Not lemon, not metal, but something warm and comforting: Mom was baking cookies. The promise of sweetness and shared treats momentarily overshadowed the coin counting, a reminder that even our most intense battles were ultimately overshadowed by the enduring bonds of family. The storm had passed, leaving behind the calm anticipation of something good.

# Memories of the Sand

By Eugene Lin

Year 7

Under the water, seashell shards and ripped seagrass, fallen from the palms of children, get tossed around onto the sand by the waves. Beyond the rocks was the water. The colour of the sand should have excited me, but I felt the opposite. It was simply sand, but black and rocky, dissected by large pieces of driftwood, which were all gone by high tide until they seemed to magically reappear when low tide struck. I did not think about the puddles I was stepping through and the thousands of small creatures that called it home for less than a single day. These existed only as a familiar backdrop on the black sand lined by palm trees. I walked along the flat sand plane, through the puddles back towards the cafe as the sun fully rose, my feet dragging along the sand. As I looked down, I saw the tiniest holes that crabs had dug into the ground. Nevertheless, the sights had entered into me, painting a familiar memory. I walked up the short flight of stairs onto the rocky footpath, the nice soothing smell of sea salt gets replaced by the smell of gasoline and motor oil. I walked towards a cafe, the sound of the ocean waves in the background interrupted by the loud roars of cars and motorbikes. As I walked up the old wooden ramp that had its cyan paint peeling off outside leading into the cafe, when I got to the top I pushed open the wooden door and the quiet music from inside entered my ears. I sat down outside on the balcony, watching the waves go up and down and then up over and over again. Inside the cafe, I ordered and paid for a coconut drink and suddenly with its cool, refreshing taste, the memories, one by one came rushing back to me.

I scrambled outside and there it was. It was massive, just like how I imagined it to turn out like a kid. It reminded me of a long time ago, years back. We planted a small coconut palm together with my friend and I. It was like yesterday, we spent the whole day digging a large hole just so it could fit our miniature seedling. After digging out all that soil, we had to put it all back in, being careful not to crush the baby plant. Then we waited and checked on it day after day. At first you couldn't even see it, and when you could, It didn't even look like it was growing, but my hope had guided me through. Every year I came back, every year we watched it grow taller and higher, feeling its coarse dry bark in the humid air and the shade it provided under the hot sun. I remember saying that it would grow so tall it would somehow reach space. Until the memory got buried inside my thoughts again, until now.

Running my fingertips over the wood that has been standing for months, years. The feeling hasn't changed at all, still symbolising our unbreakable bond together. I suppose to him, it would feel the same. It felt of the happiness, hope and friendship that was there. I don't know, maybe that tree grew this big because of our strong bond, which is just waiting to be uncovered again, never changed over time.

# Elsie

By Evelyn Christopher

Year 7

Ding, dong... ding, dong... dong, ding, ding, dong...

The grandfather clock chimes half past the hour and echoes down the hallway. It gently wakes me. I lie there and I listen for the soft click and whirl of the mechanism as the chimes reset. I open my eyes and see faded fleur de lis wallpaper on the wall opposite my bed. I remember I'm at Grandma's house. Mum and Dad are at the hospital. The doctors are worried the baby might come early.

I slowly get up and walk down the hallway past mahogany furniture covered in doilies and dust. The floorboards creak under the soft blue runner even though I try to be light-footed. I enter the lounge room, not quite sure of what I'll find but hoping they've remembered... Today is my birthday.

My mind imagines colourful streamers, glittering decorations and a cake covered in candles. But, as I walk in, my heart sinks. No presents, no balloons, no nothing. Just the gentle waft of mothballs coming from behind the upright piano against the wall. This is the worst birthday ever.

It's even worse because yesterday Elsie told me she was leaving. Elsie is my best friend. My only friend. She's my imaginary friend. No one knows about her except for me. Elsie has strawberry blonde hair, green eyes and a heart shaped birthmark on her left cheek. She came to me the same day Mum told me she was having a baby. Ever since then, we've been inseparable. We do everything together – riding bikes, climbing trees and running races. Elsie is smaller than me so sometimes I have to wait for her to catch up. We like all the same things – rainbows, swimming and ice cream. We even have the same birthday... today!

But yesterday, Elsie said she had to go. At first, I was in shock and didn't say anything. Then, I begged her not to go. "Please Elsie, please don't go. You're my best friend! Please stay" I pleaded. Salty tears filled my eyes and stung my hot cheeks as they rolled down my face. "I wish you didn't have to go. I wish we could be best friends forever." I closed my eyes and wished as hard as I could but it was no use. Elsie left.

My heart feels heavy as I sit on an antique armchair and wallow in sadness. Suddenly, my thoughts of yesterday are rudely interrupted by the old telephone ringing loudly in the kitchen. Grandma answers it and a few moments later, I hear her footsteps thump down the hallway. "It's time to go to the hospital. The baby's coming!" Grandma says from the doorway.

Grandma drives steadily along the road past the park and I instinctively look out the window and across the field to the swings, even though I know they'll be empty. A sad sigh escapes me. I don't want my family to change. I want everything to stay just the way it was.

We arrive at the hospital and walk down long corridors with fluorescent lighting. We enter the birthing suite and Dad greets me with a big, excited smile. "It's a girl! Come and meet your new baby sister!" Dad is excited, but I'm not. I'm not excited at all. I look across the room and see Mum sitting on the bed holding a baby swaddled in hospital cloth. I grumpily walk over and climb up on the bed, not even wanting to look. Mum playfully nudges me and says "Hello darling, someone wants to meet you... This is Elsie."

"Elsie?" I ask curiously. Mum nods. No, surely not, it can't be, I think to myself. I look down at the baby girl in her arms. My eyes widen and my mouth drops in awe. She has strawberry blonde hair, green eyes, and a heart shaped birthmark on her left cheek...!

## Category 5

Year 9 - 10

## The Tides of Change

By Alice Surace

Year 10

Talia stood at the edge of the sand dunes overlooking the sapphire waters of the Dampier Peninsula, her toes curling into the sun-warmed pindan earth. The sea whispered to her, the way it always had. It spoke in the tongue of her ancestors, the Bardi people—saltwater people, born of coral tides and mangrove roots. She held her acceptance letter like a feather in the wind. A scholarship to the prestigious Sydney University Nursing school. They had told her she'd make a Change. That her journey would be important—for her community, for her family, for the younger girls who watched her with quiet wonder at bush school. But Talia's chest felt tight, like she was standing at the edge of a cliff she wasn't ready to leap from. Still, she packed her belongings—bare essentials and a small pearl shell carved by her Gooloo—and flew to a world she had only seen in textbooks and television.

Sydney was a giant that never slept. Steel and glass stretched high like eucalypts of silver. Cars roared instead of wallabies bounding. The air was heavy, no scent of saltwater or cracked earth. Her room at the university Women's College was a white square of cold walls and plastic blinds. Her roommate, Lucy, came from somewhere called Mosman and had never heard of Beagle Bay.

"You're Aboriginal? Like, from the Outback?" Lucy had asked on the first night, her voice a mix of curiosity and confusion. "That must be... different."

Talia didn't answer. She just unwrapped her pearl shell and placed it on the windowsill. It reminded her who she was. The first few weeks were a blur of anatomy textbooks, city maps, and aching homesickness. The cafeteria food tasted like nothing, and every face seemed to blur into the next. Sometimes, she'd walk by the harbour, pretending the sea breeze was the breath of her country. But it wasn't the same. The tides were unfamiliar here. In class, she answered questions carefully, conscious of her accent, of how some students snickered or stared when she spoke about bush medicine or traditional healing. One lecturer praised her "perspective" like it was an exotic dish. But she stayed. Even when a group of students in the library laughed behind her back, mimicking her voice and saying she "must've ridden a kangaroo to school," she didn't flinch. She wrote down their names, then tore the page out and burned it in a small dish by her window. A quiet cleansing. She stayed.

On nights she couldn't sleep, Talia would call her Garminy back home to seek an elder's wisdom. They'd talk about the turtles nesting on the beach, the colour of the wet season sky, the laughter of her younger cousins.

"Remember, Tals," Garminy would say, her voice thick with warmth, "Change don't come easy. But it doesn't come at all if you don't take the first step."

Midway through her second year, something shifted. Talia found a small group of other Indigenous students—Yolŋu, Noongar, Wiradjuri—each carrying stories etched deep in their bones. They met weekly in a quiet room at the student centre, yarning over tea and damper, sharing survival and strength. With them, Talia felt seen. She started volunteering at the local Indigenous health clinic on weekends. The Aunties there taught her things the textbooks never could: how to listen with your whole body, how to speak with your eyes, how to treat spirit as well as skin. She wrote her essays with fire in her fingers—about closing the gap, about culturally safe care, about the need for bush hospitals staffed by mob who knew the land and the people. Still, there were hard days.

Once, during clinical placement at a city hospital, a patient refused to be treated by her. "I want a real nurse," the man had said, pushing away her hands.

Talia went to the bathroom and stared at herself in the mirror. For a moment, the old doubt returned, thick and dark. But then she remembered the pearl shell on her windowsill. She thought of her cousins back home, their wide eyes and fierce little hearts. She returned to the ward, head high.

“I am a real nurse,” she said.

When she graduated, there was no marching band, no fanfare. Just her name, called out beneath the bright lights of a hall she’d once found too cold. But when she stepped forward to receive her degree, she saw her Garminy in the crowd, face lit up like the stars over Beagle Bay.

And that was all she needed.

The wind on the Dampier Peninsula smelled of salt and homecoming. Talia stepped off the plane at Broome Airport excited to be home, ready to return to start her new role as a registered nurse in the Beagle Bay Health Clinic. Dressed in her new uniform, her stethoscope shined like a badge of honour. The clinic was small—just a few rooms and a rickety veranda—but it pulsed with purpose. She was the first Bardi woman registered nurse to work there. The first to bring modern medicine wrapped in the wisdom of her people. She held hands, gave vaccinations, translated medical jargon into stories people could trust. She listened, deeply. She knew.

Some days, she’d walk to the beach after her shift, watching the tides roll in, whispering her name like they’d missed her.

Talia.

Change had come. Not as a tidal wave, but as a rising tide—slow, steady, and powerful.

And she was its keeper.

Glossary

Translation English/ Bardi (Indigenous Australian Language)

English	Bardi
Paternal Grandfather	Gooloo
Maternal Grandmother	Garminy

Typing...

By Zoe Mason

Year 9

i remember a time  
when my phone lit up  
a second heartbeat  
street lamps flickering on  
one by one

our group chat-  
named 'us'-  
some emojis  
hearts  
stars

we had nicknames  
inside jokes  
'when we're ninety-five,'  
we'd text,  
'can we all share a nursing home?'

our secret language  
of memory upon memory  
layers of a cake  
baked over years of friendship

and then  
when the clock ticked into the evening  
minute

by  
minute

i would spill the broken pieces  
of my heart  
as though our group chat  
was some kind of communal operating table  
and slowly  
they would stitch me back together.

#

piper  
amelie  
ellie  
and me

piper  
typed in all caps  
laughed with too many e's  
her presence like a shout

even in silence  
she was-  
is?

bright  
lit up like the notifications  
waking me at 2am  
just to say  
'look at this!'

amelie  
typed in all lowercase  
delicate  
quiet  
'i love you guys'  
she would send pictures of clouds  
captions saying 'this one looks like us'  
she was always right

ellie  
she was punctuation  
full stops when we rambled  
question marks when we fell quiet  
never too loud  
never too vague  
clarity  
structure  
and now, her last message-  
'ok'  
no punctuation

#

piper moved up the coast  
i still remember every crevice of her room  
like it was my own

amelie found new friends  
better friends  
she doesn't need us anymore

ellie just stopped texting.

#

we were a family-  
school camp  
2am  
truth or dare  
'promise to keep in touch?'

we cried together  
when piper moved away  
last day of school



at first  
i did try  
to hold us together  
be the glue  
but no one  
noticed  
when i dried up  
and  
c r a c k e d  
#  
now that group chat is an empty room  
i hold the key  
but when i enter  
no one looks my way  
and so i just step back out of the door  
i write in dust on the walls  
'hi'  
'how's everyone doing?'  
'i miss you guys'  
but i wipe it away  
before anyone realises i was ever there  
#  
sometimes i open my phone  
muscle memory  
enter passcode  
swipe up  
open group chat  
scroll back through years  
of texts  
laughter  
confessions  
plans  
i type out a message  
'remember the time...'  
i see those three little dots  
three little ghosts  
typing...  
it gives me a little thrill  
i hover my finger  
over the send button  
just to feel something  
a n y t h i n g

#  
sometimes i dream  
of when that group chat would light up  
message  
                upon  
                                message  
sometimes i dream  
of a day  
i see a notification  
*piper is typing...*  
and i dream  
that we would f  
                                a  
  |  
  |  
into conversation  
like nothing had changed  
'stop dreaming.'  
i tell myself  
dreams only rot faster  
when you pretend  
they're still  
alive.  
#  
i press and hold the delete button  
like a loaded gun  
erasing words  
one  
                by  
                                one  
before i can be erased  
#  
school:  
i walk along the hallway  
head down  
one step at a time  
fade into the background  
of conversations i'm not invited to join  
the teacher calls my name on the roll  
the sound gifting me  
with life

i think i only exist  
in the reflection  
of someone else's eyes  
in pieces  
scattered across  
other people's lives  
'here,' i respond  
and just like that  
the moment  
ends  
#  
i get home from school  
tired  
empty  
this pit inside me  
yearning for company  
i open the chat  
the name still reads-  
'us'  
some emojis  
hearts  
stars  
i type out another message  
'hey- i've been thinking of you guys'  
finger pauses above the delete button  
i hesitate  
then hit send  
casting a lifeline  
out into the darkness  
hoping someone will hear me  
and respond  
message delivered  
a pause  
message seen  
by piper.  
by amelie.  
by ellie.  
nothing.  
just two blue ticks  
two blue nails in my coffin

wasn't i a good friend?  
didn't i slowly give away  
pieces of my soul  
to feed their hunger  
until they had consumed  
all of me  
and there was nothing left?  
i think getting stabbed  
right between the ribs  
would hurt less  
than the pain i feel  
right now.  
#  
i sit in darkness  
longer than i should.  
not crying  
not anything, really  
just  
there  
i wonder  
if the train was coming  
would i move?  
if the ground fell  
from beneath my feet  
would i even notice?  
#  
i remember that one quote-  
mary lambert, i think-  
*I only know how to exist*  
when  
                                i'm  
  wanted  
maybe i'm only there  
when my name  
sits on the tip of someone else's tongue  
breathing me into existence  
i think i've forgotten  
how to be real enough  
unless someone else is watching.  
#  
i return to the chat  
a day later

my message sits untouched  
a sacrificial offering  
left forgotten  
on the doorstep of an abandoned house

i want to delete it  
erase the evidence  
but i let it rot there  
a piece of me  
slowly decaying  
for the world to see  
in case someone  
someday  
cares enough to notice

i guess even ghosts  
stop haunting  
after a while.  
maybe the ghosts only stayed  
because  
no one else  
did.

#  
i put the phone down  
face down  
sit with the silence  
let it swallow me whole  
i don't try to fill it  
i let it echo

#  
maybe one day  
i'll make a new chat  
add no one  
call it 'me  
some emojis  
a heart  
a star  
maybe i'll say things  
comfortable in the solitude  
type in all caps  
and all lowercase

use too many exclamation marks  
maybe even one 'i love you'

maybe  
i'll learn  
to exist  
to be real  
to be whole  
on my own

#  
but not tonight.

tonight  
i slowly disappear  
from the quiet  
from the space they left behind

from the memories of someone  
who was once  
loved

i imagine my name  
spoken somewhere  
softly  
by someone who doesn't realise  
they are speaking me  
into existence

existence-  
what is it?  
do i only exist as a mirror  
reflecting life  
when someone stands before me?  
only becoming solid  
when someone cares to touch me  
with their attention?

i float  
in the space between real  
and not  
forever  
and always

typing...

## Moonlight Beneath the Sun

By Noah Gonçalves Ferreira

Year 10

There were two brothers.

One was born at dawn sun, fire in his lungs and power in his stride. The other under a waning moon, legs too weak to run, eyes too dull to blind. From the start, the world called them Prodigy and Shadow.

Kael, the younger of the two, remembered the first time he watched his brother Rey grasp a blade. It was instinctive. Effortless. The sword bent to his will as if it were home. Kael spent years trying to mimic that motion, striking the same strokes until his palms bled. But he was never more than a spark in Rey's flame.

He reminded himself that he did not care. He trained. He built a life. He married. He had a child. But on quiet nights, when the stars were shining brightly and the fire had burned low hours before, Kael found himself feeling a bitter knot down deep in his throat—a knotty knot of jealousy that nothing could dislodge, including time or love.

Rey never required anyone, Kael believed. Not even their mother. But she relied on Rey anyway. Kael was the one reaching out forever, and Rey, the one just out of reach.

Then Rey disappeared.

No letter. No goodbye. Just gone, as if the world wasn't worth his ability. Kael was angry with him for that. And when their mother died, he was angrier.

Years passed. The world spun. Kael became strong—not in skill, but in will. He trained not to excel, but to better. He would shine brighter than the Sun if that was the price of being turned to ashes. He sought it like a famished man in search of purpose.

And one morning, standing over the bodies of warriors much younger, much faster, Kael saw him again.

Rey.

Old now. Scathed. But still gleaming. Still upright.

A catch in Kael's breathing, and he was again the boy—vindictive, small, and forgotten. "Why?" he breathed. "Why came you back today? Why rescue me?"

Rey said nothing. He simply looked at him with eyes which knew too well.

Kael snarled. "I abandoned my family. Threw everything away trying to be more than your shadow. And still—still—you're the one they look to."

That night, Kael sat alone, sword over his knees. His face in the metal looked like a stranger's. He recalled the laugh of his wife, the soft fingers of his son. But their faces had disappeared along with time. All he had left was the hunger—to conquer, to prove, to excel.

Even if it destroyed him to dive into darkness.

And so, he did.

Kael gave up mortality for power. Became something vile, something eternal. No suffering. No restraints. No timers ticking toward the end of his life. Now, he was a creature of the dark.

The Moon shines brightest with its full potential in the night, he reminded himself. Let Rey bask in the Sun.

It ought to have been enough.

But as he faced three of the next generation’s most dominant warriors—three children who didn’t bow their heads—Kael felt it again.

That feeling in his throat.

Not sorrow. Not rage.

Envy.

They’d left him behind, too, like Rey. And then, suddenly, the centuries weren’t anything anymore. Kael was no longer invincible—merely weary. Trapped in a body that healed indefinitely but lacked heat.

He yelled. Ripped at them. Triumpled. Killed. Triumpled once more.

And yet, in a moment of flame and metal, his mask broke.

In a glass of broken glass and blood, he looked at himself—a monster. Not a brother. Not a man.

When did I become this? When did I change?

The sword he had fought with lay on the ground. It felt foreign now, like it was someone else’s.

“I never wanted to be strongest,” he whispered. “I just wanted to be like him.”

In his dying moments, Kael once more saw the face of Rey—crystal clear. Not a god. Not a rival. Just his brother. Flawed. Weary. But kind. His perspective changed. The only person he had chased throughout his life, never knowing he could’ve walked alongside him.

Kael looked up towards the sky.

The Moon was full. But it was no longer home.

He shut his eyes, and let it go.

Years later, young fighters would whisper of the battle that claimed three lives and lost none. They spoke of a demon whose eyes burned with fire coal who cried in the end—not for mercy, but for memory.

They never learned his name.

But among the older fighters, who remembered the Sun and Moon days, there was a legend. Of two brothers, one born to light, one born to darkness. And of the jealousy that nearly consumed them both.

Not all monsters are born monsters.

Some are simply men who forgot how to dream without comparing their wings to another man’s sky.

# Procedural

By Lok Tin Samuel Shen

Year 9

## The Crime

The man looked out of his window. The alley next to his house was eerily silent, but he was sure he had heard something. With a sense of unease, he turned around and started for his bed.

“It was nothing, nothing at all,” he whispered to himself, looking down at his trembling hands. They were covered in some sort of liquid, but in the dim light, the man couldn’t tell what it was. It was probably just sweat.

He wiped them against his shirt and climbed into bed, his mind whirring uncontrollably. Something was begging him for attention, a voice screaming inside his mind, like a tortured animal in a cage, but he ignored it. The cotton sheets felt cold against his skin, his body stiff with exhaustion.

But sleep did not come.

## The Investigation

It was a dull Thursday morning, and the man was tired. He wiped the sweat off his face, muttering to himself about how much he hated his life.

He stepped out of his house, eyes heavy, movements slow. The air felt thick, suffocating, and he couldn’t explain why.

He approached his car and reached for the handle—

“Sir.”

The voice was sharp, slicing through the morning fog in his brain. He blinked, looking up, his eyes clouded. Two officers in blue stood by his vehicle, their expressions unreadable. One of them cleared their throat.

“We need to ask you some questions”

The words hit him like a punch to the gut. His breath caught in his throat as it constricted. He didn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe.

“What...what are you talking about?”

One of the officers lifted a small plastic evidence bag. Inside it was a crimson-stained piece of fabric.

“This was found near your house,” the officer said. “As I said before, we need you to answer a few questions.”

Something icy curled in the man’s stomach. That fabric — it looked eerily familiar.

## The Evidence

The interrogation room was cold and clinical, nothing but white walls and the ticking of a clock. The man sat stiffly across from the detective, his fingers twitching against the table’s surface, his eyes darting around the room, from the clock to the table to the face of the police officer.

“You were home last night, correct?” the detective asked, flipping through a folder.

“Yes,” the man murmured. “I — I thought I heard something, but I didn’t see anything.”

The detective studied him carefully. “Yet when we approached you this morning, your hands had blood on them.”

The man stopped breathing, once again futilely gasping for air. Something changed in his mind. Something clicked. He took a small, sharp breath and looked down at his hands. They were clean now — washed so many times his skin felt raw.

Blood?

Had it really been blood?

The detective slid a single printed photograph across the table.

The man looked down. The blank face staring back at him was familiar. Too familiar.

A boy. Pale. Lifeless.

His own son.

Patrick.

**The Interrogation**

The world blurred around him. The detective’s voice was distant, distorted, drowned by the deafening roar of his own thoughts.

It couldn’t be.

Not his son.

Not Patrick.

“I don’t— I don’t understand,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I didn’t—”

“You were seen outside your house late last night,” the detective continued. “A neighbor reported movement in the alley, someone dragging something heavy.”

The man swallowed, forcing it down his throat. His own thoughts betrayed him—flashes of last night, fragments of images he couldn’t piece together. The alley. The silence. The weight in his arms.

“No,” he whispered, voice cracking. “I don’t remember.”

The detective leaned forward. “Try harder.”

And so he did.

He closed his eyes; forced himself to remember.

The sound of Patrick’s voice. The argument. The anger in his chest.

A struggle.

A fall.

A sickening crack.

The weight of his son’s body in his arms.

The alley.

The silence.

His trembling hands.

The blood.

His breath turned ragged, his pulse hammering in his ears.

Had he killed his own child?

Had he disposed of the body like garbage?

Tears blurred his vision, but nothing could distort the reality that had begun to unravel before him.

**The Verdict**

The trial was quick. The evidence was overwhelming: his fingerprints on Patrick’s shirt, the blood found beneath his nails, the witness statements that painted him as a man crumbling under his own guilt.

He sat in the courtroom, numb.

The prosecutor’s words rang out, though he barely heard them.

Guilty.

Life in prison.

A murderer.

His own son Patrick.

Gone.

Forever.

**The End**

In that moment, sitting alone, condemned, the man realised something horrifying.

He hadn’t meant to kill him.

He had loved his son.

But rage had stolen that love, twisting him into something cruel and monstrous.

And now, his child was dead.

And he was the reason why.

## Category 6

### Year 11 - 12

## Nine Years

By Maya Reed

Year 11

9 years. I'm sitting on a school bus being driven to Canberra with my cohort, talking had been strictly banned on the bus as we only received a three out of six-star rating from the driver. Lovely four hours. My teacher was sitting in a classic position, man spread and staring intently down the bus. She started loudly announcing that we only had nine more years until climate change became irreversible and proclaimed that we, 5th graders, had to do something about it. I was shocked by how little time we had left and even more by the notion that I had to 'save the earth'.

7 years. One of the topics for my religion class had been about how we relate to the land and how we are responsible for taking care of it. I'm not religious, but it took me back to the same ideas that I had been taught growing up: respect for all living beings. I remember going on bush walks and thinking to myself, how could anyone care more about the money lining their pockets coming from unsustainable practices rather than conserving what we have been so undeservingly given to look after? But even I was part of the problem; we all are.

5 years. Researching a topic can only do so much when it comes to changing actual physical damage. I learnt that the hard way, incorporating important issues into conversations wasn't as powerful as I thought. Having to leave the classroom when "Our Planet" was playing because I felt the pit in my stomach grow every time masses of ice fell in the Arctic, reminded me just how much change is still needed to happen. Thinking about climate change is uncomfortable at the best of times.

4 years,109 days. I'm not sure how often everyone thinks about climate change. I know my parents have learned to tune me out by now. I also know that you don't have to think about an issue constantly for it to be important enough to influence change in your life. Being educated on a subject is vital to widespread change, but actively pursuing change for yourself and others can be just as powerful. We now only have 4 years and 109 days left. Think about where you will be in 4 years, your children, and your family. My sisters won't even be out of high school by then, but the effects of climate change will follow them their whole lives. If we don't remedy this issue, then habitats will crumble, and hundreds of thousands of species will go extinct with them. As weather unpredictability increases, our most vulnerable population of people will be affected, and we will lose biodiversity in the ocean. Big companies want to sell you the idea of moving planets, but that will not house us all, much less sustain us. I have been counting down that day for five years now, and I tether myself to the belief that we can still make a change.

I have been extremely lucky in my life to be able to travel to some of the most beautiful places on Earth. But I have also seen firsthand the devastating effects climate change has already had. Once beautiful coral reefs housing thousands of species turned into pale husks of life. I have heard first-hand how changes in once-reliable weather patterns have affected First Nations peoples, causing devastating effects to ancestral land. Furthermore, extreme weather events, droughts and floods make it hard to obtain healthy, fresh food and adequate healthcare, which affects their quality of life and livelihoods.

When I was younger, I thought it was stupid to think a 5th grader would be able to stop climate change, but this is an issue that all people need to adapt to. It is not up to one generation or group; everyone is responsible for looking after our Earth.



# Just a Notebook

By Xenia Beck

Year 11

The summer sun cast long shadows over the quiet suburban street. It was the kind of afternoon where the world seemed to pause, hanging from rays of sunlight. She clutched her phone, the screen still aglow with the message that had shattered her world. She read it again, hoping the words would rearrange themselves into something else. But they didn't. They never would. A sense of unreality settled over her as she sank onto the front steps of her porch, her heart a whirlwind of disbelief and grief. Memories of Alyssa crashed over her. Their laughs, texts, secrets shared under blankets; each one hurt more than the last.

The days that followed were hard, filled with a swap between therapy sessions and the suffocating comfort of her bed, where she would curl up like a wilting flower, watching movies that she barely noticed. Every corner of her life whispered Alyssa's name, trapping her in a cycle of questions and guilt.

For a whole month, she lay there, drowning in her thoughts, questioning every moment, every word, every breath. What could she have done? Could she have saved her? It felt as though a piece of her soul had been torn away, leaving an aching void that echoed with loss. There was a hole in her world, vast and unfillable, like a missing star in her sky.

"Sweetie, you can't blame yourself. It is not your fault," Dr. Roberts said softly, his voice like a gentle breeze trying to soothe her raging storm.

She sat on the couch, her fingers tangled in the fabric of her jumper, she lowered her gaze, as if the floor might hold the answers she searched for. She didn't speak, her silence thick as smoke, filling the room.

"There was nothing you could've done to change it." Dr. Roberts continued, his words bittersweet that offered no comfort.

Still, she said nothing. The silence lingered like a heavy fog.

"If you don't want to talk to me, talk to someone else. It feels better when you let it all out," he urged gently.

...

"Or write it down. I know it's hard, but trust me, it helps," he said, his tone as soothing as a warm embrace.

She looked up to see a red notebook in his hand, its cover bright and unamusing, yet somehow full of promise. It was just a notebook, blank and waiting, with plenty of pages to fill with the words she had buried deep inside. Hesitantly, she reached out and brought it to her lap.

Dr. Roberts smiled as they both stood up to leave, his smile a small beacon of light and encouragement. As they walked through the corridor, he said, "Have a good day now," and for the first time in three sessions, she responded, "Thank you."

Curled back in her forest of pillows and blankets, she reaches for the red notebook on her night stand. Holding it in her hands, she grabs a pen and flicks to the first page.

Dear Diary,

*I was given this notebook by someone who gave me a touch of hope the other day. It's stupid, I know, but it made me realise what has happened. I don't talk to anyone, I haven't even said a word to my own mother. I can't process what I am thinking, so now I pass the burden onto you (sorry).*

*I keep blaming myself, even when I shouldn't. But the guilt follows me like a lost dog. I can't even tell it to be free and leave, it's impossible. Like playing fetch, it always comes right back. I hate it.*

*But here I am, writing to you to tell myself I can. That it's not my fault and that I can grow over this. I need to get up, go for a walk and talk to the people I love in my life. Oh god, now I sound like my therapist.*

*Anyways, I just wanted to thank you (a bloody book, I really am insane) for letting me express how I feel for the first time. I am sure I will be writing to you soon. Bye.*

Through the next week she battled, battled with the fog of change that clouds her mind and vision with grief. She learned to walk, talk and live with that pain inside. She wrote until there were no more pages to write.

A month later she went to Alyssa's grave, tears rolling down her face. Dark fences lined the tall stones that will never forget the lives they represent. Placing flowers and pictures painted with tears, she said "Until I see you again, look after me won't you." The cloud that once followed her was gone, she made peace and moved on.

She turned around and walked away, leaving the red notebook behind her.

# Fragments of a Fractured Mind

By Annika Mills

Year 11

One hour from Cleansing.

We exist in moments. Tiny, insignificant fractions of time, ghostly imprints on a world that has forsaken us. Scrawling desperate scratches on an unforgiving concrete wall, uneven dirt shaken by boots- shuffling, twisting, collapsing. Bloodied specks splattered on shrivelling grass, an invisible map of once was; of what still is. A towering wall, scarred in insurgence. The suffocating fabric of burlap sack clung to my face as I peered through the lone unravelling hole. Beaded eyes stared back.

They did not blink. They did not move. It's as if they were waiting. Waiting for my death. Waiting for me to remember.

The flock of ravens watched.

They watched as they had done that night.

They cannot see-

see them.

It waits under my  
fingernails

Watching-

dissecting.

Circling in the sky-  
sky

A reflection  
reflection

They don't scream, they don't mourn - why would they? This is not horror

to them, not tragedy,

just another feast laid out in  
red

We did not see  
them.

When the soldiers come knocking, some say it's not their fault. That their brain breaks under the strain, that the world inside them is too much to carry. But Suveren doesn't have time for weak minds, for change, for fragility. Mental illness is a disease, a virus we can all catch. One biological weaponry disaster, one mass psychotic outbreak, one guilty minister, one fabricated science report; that was all it took to convince society that mental illness was contagious, festering in the mind, in the cracks of society itself. So they grip the trigger and eradicate what they fear, silence what threatens their comfort. My father opened the door. One more body for the tally. One more mark in the Ministry's ledgers. One necessary correction, filed, and erased. Mother followed. They were no longer people, just shapes, ruins, disfigured remnants of the lives they once lived. Each smear of blood is a name I will never speak again. The soldiers came. They killed. They left. Tears, hot and thick, crawling down my face - guilt, shame, writhing like worms under my skin, tearing apart the flesh from the inside out, digging deeper with every drop, until there's nothing left but hollow echoes and the hunger to disappear. But the dog that weeps after it kills is no better than the one that doesn't. My guilt won't purify me. When they took me away, they slapped the word on me, branded me. Schizophrenia. A bible verse, written in blood when I was born.

They blink and time skips, their beaks tap, and I lose an hour, a day, a year - are they keeping track, or am I losing my place in the world?

One disease. One cure. Elimination.

The slogan is plastered all over the walls of the asylum, watching, warning. Sterile fluorescent lights hum above, not a steady, mechanical noise but a live, beating rhythm, masking the banging of fists on unforgiving iron doors. Shadows slither around here. I am not insane. Lead scratches across the ivory paper, like the scraping noise of a broken record. I am not insane. I write it again and again, the page a courtroom and I am pleading my case. A silhouette with wings perches on my singular barred window, slick feathers ruffling as a piercing cry resounds through my room, bouncing off the watching four walls. A cry of warning or laughter, I do not know. The caws still echo in my skull, but it's not the birds. It's the blood. The guilt. The ravens just carry it for me. I ignore the searing stare of beaded eyes, aware of the whirring camera installed in the corner of my room. The Purity Regime. That's what they're called. Some whisper of their heroism, of order restored by their hands. But here, we have only one name for them. Murderers. The asylum walls have embedded speakers that play distorted voices at night - sometimes propaganda, sometimes the recorded confessions of those executed before. Sometimes, just crying. They call me by my name here, but it feels like a borrowed coat, stitched together with voices that aren't mine. I wear myself like a mask, but the holes are growing, and something else is staring through the cracks. I am not insane. The words do not belong to me anymore. I write the same thing over and over and over- but the letters melt, ink turking to veins, veins turning to roots, roots digging into my skull, and blooming into something ugly. I know that children snap. Gone in the night. They do not return. What about me is truly insane - the fractured visions slithering around the corners of my sight, or the fact I find solace within these walls, hiding from the chaos of my own mind, even when I know.

I know that I am next.

Peeling me apart

plucking at the loose seams in my mind.

Skin splitting like paper

It shouldn't have been that

easy.

The walls are white. Were white. Not anymore. Not with all this red

red.

per

Pulse beating against my palm, a small, frantic thing. A raven trapped in a fist. I squeezed.

Birds weren't meant to be

caged.

One minute from Cleansing.

The soldiers don't move, but the ravens - they're restless now, their wings twitching as though they know it's time. Every conversation a whisper, every glance a prelude. They wait. They were always waiting. They bring death, but not with malice - with certitude. A certainty, an inevitable realization, the only thing that we know will befall us. There are no exceptions, no surprises: all paths lead to it. It follows me - orbits me, its presence a constant storm at the edges of my vision. The barrel is small. Too small. How does death fit in there?

I start counting my breaths, as if I can stretch time before it runs out.

# Route 835

By Rosanna Robertson

Year 11

There are three stops from Darbyshire to Elmwood. A forty-minute ride. At two in the morning, the same faces board, bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived. This doesn't change. There are four stories I've read on this bus—not written anywhere, but carved into bodies and faces, stitched into the fabric of their clothes. Burnt coffee and petrol linger in the air, mixing with exhaustion.

The banker is always first to leave. His suit is rumpled, his tie abandoned for perfume that lingers too long and lipstick that isn't his wife's. He always takes the same seat—five rows back, window side—never bothering to fix his collar or hide the bruises blooming along his neck.

There was a time when someone waited for him. A wife with a tired smile, car warm, heart colder with each unanswered text. The supermarket bouquets worked for a while, then they didn't. Eventually, she stopped waiting.

The surgeon follows. Scrubs stained with coffee and smudges of blood she's too exhausted to notice. She's a ghost, barely held together. Three years ago, she still called her mother, voice warm but tired. She never finished the conversation — sleep took her mid-sentence. Now, she doesn't bother. The bus hums beneath her, lulling her into the only quiet she knows. When her stop comes, she stirs just enough to step off. She almost forgets her bag. The driver doesn't.

Then there's the stray. Her expression is guarded, cracked fingernails resting on the butterfly knife in her pocket. At first glance, she's all sharp edges, sharp words. But I remember her months ago, back when her hoodie was just old instead of dirty, back when she didn't wear rainwater in her sleeves and bruises like second skin. She's thinner now, paler. The kind of tired that sleep won't fix. One night, the bus hits a pothole, and she flinches. Just for a second. It's the smallest thing, barely noticeable, but I catch it. It tells me more than she ever will. I wonder how long she's been running. I don't know where she goes when she gets off. Maybe a friend's couch, a shelter that won't ask questions. Maybe nowhere at all.

The driver knows their stories. He doesn't need words to understand the banker, the surgeon, the stray. They step onto his bus every night, carrying their exhaustion like luggage, their secrets stitched into their clothes. But none of them ever ask for his story.

They don't know that he used to have a different life, a different routine. That he once wore a uniform unstained by grease, that his hands weren't always rough from gripping a steering wheel for hours on end. They don't know he once had a son who loved trains, who pressed his hands to the window whenever they passed the old station.

They don't know about the call he got one night. An accident. A drunk driver who walked away unscathed. His son, gone before the ambulance arrived. His wife, holding on just long enough to hear his voice. They don't know that he stopped believing in fairness, in luck, in anything. That he slowed down. That he traded a life of movement for a life of circles, retracing the same route every night, as if repetition might bring something back.

The banker steps off without a glance. The driver watches him go, knowing he's walking into an empty house. The surgeon follows, smaller than she used to be.

The stray lingers. That doesn't change.

The driver just drives.

One  
Two  
Three.  
I won't make it to four.  
Somewhere, a raven drops dead from the sky.



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