

**WRITE
AROUND
THE MURRAY** 13 – 17 Sept 2023



RIVER OF STORIES
WINNING ENTRIES
SECONDARY SHORT STORIES
2023

**WRITE
AROUND
THE MURRAY** 13 – 17 Sept 2023



CONTENTS

Year 7-8

Winner: Caitlin Talbot, Home Educated – *The Crossing*

Runner-up: Suniya Taylor, Mount Beauty Secondary College – *When the Sky Cries*

Runner-up: Caitlin Talbot, Home Educated – *My Golden Horseshoes*

Years 9-10

Winner: Tayah Spalding, Victory Lutheran College – *Summer Tragedy*

Runner-up: Brock Powell, Billabong High School, Culcairn – *The Man*

Runner-up: Charlie Pinard, Catholic College Wodonga – *She*

Years 11-12

Winner: Ruby Kane, Albury High School – *Omerta*

Runner-up: Lylah Ellao, The Scots School Albury – *Bosver*

**WRITE
AROUND
THE** *13 – 17 Sept*
MURRAY



YEAR 7-8 CATEGORY

Year 7-8 Winner: Caitlin Talbot [Home Educated]

Title: *The Crossing*

"Whoa!" Pa shouted. Bella and Prince obeyed the command and the wagon soon squeaked to a stop. Behind us the Docker's wagon also came to rest.

The three thousand or so sheep that had come with us ceased their continuous bleating and started nibbling the small blades of grass that struggled for their existence on the lonely, well beaten track.

Slowly the dust settled. Before us loomed a giant rushing river, the steep bank on the opposing side was filled with ruts and huge Red Gums dotted the banks. Besides me, Rex, my ever faithful sheepdog, pricked up his ears at the sound of rushing water.

"We will give it a go anyway. No harm should be done," I heard Mr Docker saying to Pa whom was now standing at the foot of his boss's wagon. "George," Mr Docker raised his voice a little so the half deaf drover would hear him, "Push the cattle through first."

George trotted his horse over. "Yer reckon they can make it? Not too sure 'bout that boss, but yer word goes. The Murray sure is angry, the current she's plenty strong." He urged his horse into a trot, moving off.

"So this is the Murray," I thought to myself, "This angry river with its rushing current."

Besides me Rex started to whine, as the stubborn cattle reluctantly found themselves knee-deep in the rushing water. Some of the cowardly ones pushed and shoved their way back to dry land, but finally George and Henry managed to push them in until they found themselves swimming, with only their heads above the current of swirling brown water.

George and Henry went in after them. One of the cattle was swept downstream and out of sight. Another dozen or so struggled to keep their heads above water.

Then in one horrible moment Henry disappeared... being swept off his horse by the furious current and carried downstream until he regained his feet and stumbled up the bank on the opposite side. His horse fared somewhat better, making the bank before his master.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, the bullocks made it, fatigued and exhausted, to the other side of the Murray. They dropped to the ground like raindrops dropping on barren soil. Henry collected his horse, made his way towards the cattle and sat down under a tree.

By this time Pa had made his way back to our wagon. "Evan, I've gotta stay back and help Fred and John with the sheep," he told me. "You will be fine takin' the wagon over won't yer?" His question was more of a command than anything, "The goods wagons and Mr Docker will go first and then yer to follow."

I nodded, unable to talk. To think of tackling a river with a current like this all by myself! Especially after having seen what happened to Henry!

With my heart in my throat I pushed Bella and Prince forward into the rushing current. At first they pranced in the knee-deep water splashing it everywhere but finally they were swimming with only their heads above the mighty current, the wagon swaying recklessly.

Rex started growling frantically as suddenly Bella started to flounder. My heart caught, "Was she drowning?" My mind started filling up with questions. Adrenaline was rushing through me, the wind was whipping at my face. Rex growled again, and then I jumped...

Water was filling my mouth as I struggled in the deep water. I could feel myself being pulled by the powerful current. With my lungs bursting, I needed to find the surface soon.

Just as I began to rise to the surface, I felt something pull sharply on my right ankle. Sure enough as I had jumped I'd caught myself in the reins and now I'd become tangled! What if I couldn't escape? Was I doomed here suffering until I'd drown from the lack of air?

I was caught here, tangled. If only I could find a way out! My brain started to explode with the very horror of the situation.

I started to kick wildly until the pressure was released. Rising to the surface, I came up spluttering and choking, gulping in the fresh air I made my way to Bella.

Grasping her halter I hulled her forward. "Come on Bella," I urged. Bella flared her nostrils out wide breathing in deeply.

Besides her Prince neighed frantically. "Not you too," I pleaded. The current swept me under again. By the time I'd come back up to the surface we'd reached the bank. Somehow above the noise of the river I heard Rex bark in excitement.

George was waiting for us, urging the horses up the bank he clapped me on the back. "Good job boy," he grinned.

The horses were next, the couple of mares and stallion Mr Docker had brought down south with him in hopes of breeding them up to sell to other pioneer settlers when they came, as he was sure they eventually would. Without any trouble the horses came on through the water, noble beasts they were, healthy and strong.

By the time I'd stopped shivering, the sheep had been driven across. Around sixty had drowned, poor beasts. Another twenty or so had been swept downstream. They had all been retrieved by hand, men dragging seemingly dead weight behind them. Now they stood altogether once more, water dripping from their waterlogged fleeces their heads hanging low.

Finally, we were finished with the Murray and ahead of us lay the work of establishing Mr Docker's new station which he had already named "Bontharambo".

"I'm proud of ya Evan," Pa said once the crossing was complete and we were on our journey again. "Supportin' Bella like that. Yer only a boy Evan but ya did a man's job. Never forget that."

This work of fiction is based on the crossing of the Murray River made by Joseph Docker and his contingent when relocating his family to establish Bontharambo near the Owen's River near Wangaratta, in 1838.

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Suniya Taylor [Mount Beauty Secondary College]

Title: : *When the Sky Cries*

People have said that I have too many opinions, I do not disagree. I think that our cottage is too small. I think that the swans that swim in the lake should nest when the weather is nicer. People have said that I am smart, I know that. I know that a shrimp's heart is in its head. I know that it is physically impossible for a pig to look up into the sky, but I don't know why Dad hid us away. I know I am special. I know I am stubborn. I know I am smart. I know that people like to talk.

Photos of us clung to the wooden walls and the sweet smell of eucalyptus flooded the hallways. A portrait of our family sat on the mantel piece, beside a vase of native flowers. Wattles and waratahs. Mumma's favourites.

"Gracey, we're going out!" called Dad, pulling on his faded, felt hat. "Coming!" It was the day we would visit town and collect the supplies we couldn't make or grow ourselves. Quickly, I shook out my cracked, bright red gumboots, just like Dad had taught me. My favourite shoes. My only shoes. A poisonous fire ant crawled out. Lucky. I followed Dad, his steps making the forest floor shake. I skipped behind him. My flowing, floral dress, red gumboots and the fleshy pink scar that stretched across my face did not match, but I thought I wore it well.

I immediately recognised the faded 'Welcome to Hennington' sign. A boy wearing a blue sun hat pointed at us. At my face. His mother scolded him. A group of girls cupped their hands around their mouths and started to whisper. Everybody stared. Everybody had heard the rumours. I didn't care that they stared. I didn't even care that they whispered. I enjoyed it. It felt as if I was famous, like the people in my books. It had been seven years since we had left town.

When we passed the old, blue house on the corner my heart twisted. I used to call that house home. It felt strange not to run up, swing the door open and dive into the embrace of Mum's warm hugs. Mum wasn't here anymore. The old, blue house was not home anymore. It was the same, but different. They had rebuilt the parts that had burnt. A girl sat on the swing that Dad had put up. It was her home now. I smiled. Sadly.

Dad went into a few shops but avoided talking to people. I waited outside. When people stared at me, I smiled and waved. They did not expect that. I enjoyed surprising people. Some people dropped coins at my feet. They saw my scars. They pitied me. That confused me. We used that money to buy two big, gooey, coffee scrolls and began the march home, my hands sticky from the sweet icing.

"I had no choice but to hide us away." Dad said sadly as we walked. I am smart, but I'm not that smart.

I think it was the scars. The fire. I was five, Dad was not home. A candle tipped, the house burnt, and Mum burnt with it. I survived. People pointed, people stared, and people hurt Dad. He hid us away because he was scared. It didn't scare me.

"Today's gonna' be a scorcher!" Dad chuckled the next morning, as he came in from the shed. I could tell it was going to be hot too, the Magpies had gurgled more than ever before and the swans had left weeks ago. The radio whirred 'Tiny Dancer' by a singer that Mum used to like. I couldn't help but hum along. "Ballerinaaa, you must have seen her..." Mum once said that I

was her little ballerina, miniature princess, tiny dancer. "She sings the song, the words she knows, the tune she hums..."

Dad moved toward the stream, bucket in hand, he says it's just in case. In case of fire. That word makes me shudder. It is a soft word, but it makes my tongue roll and my heart ache. There would be no fire, I would not let there be. I saw it. I remembered it. I dreaded it. Dad was at the stream, getting the water when it formed, like a monster. Bushfire.

"Fire." I said, but this time it was not a soft word. The flames licked the sides of our wooden cottage and smoke started to rise from every corner of the house. It was like a dream, no, a nightmare. I tried to run but it seemed impossible, I tried to call for Dad's help but suddenly, my throat was dry. Just like the night my face changed. No. Not like that, it mustn't be.

Forcing my feet forward, I ran for the buckets of water Dad had collected. I gripped my hands against the handle and hurled the water at the protruding flames. Quickly, the beast fizzled out but just as fast, it returned. I splashed the water against the roaring fire but time and time again the flames returned. Beads of sweat rolled down my forehead and my fingers blistered, but I couldn't stop. Dad joined my side and we both thrust the water, but nothing worked.

Bucket after bucket, breath after breath we struggled. It wasn't possible. I dropped to the ground, tears dribbled down my ash marked cheeks and smoke stung my eyes. I tried but I failed.

Dad collapsed beside me; I had never seen him cry before. Not even at her funeral. I buried my head in his arms, and we watched our home, our lifestyle, falling to pieces.

Dad let out a strangled breath, "I have lost too much Gracey. Your Mumma, our home. Don't let me lose you too." His eyes flashed with the same pain I felt that day. The tears seemed to rain down, the sky cried for us too. Rain drops fell from the gathering clouds onto the burning cottage. It was too good to be true. The flames tried to fight but the rain was too strong. The fire surrendered and we had our home back, our happiness. From beneath the ash and fallen timber, lay the portrait of our family. "It's okay Daddy, it's not that scary."

I know a lot of things that other people don't know, I know that all babies are born with blue eyes, I know that fires are an event not a thing, and I know that we are beautiful no matter what people say.

Year 7-8 Runner-Up: Caitlin Talbot [Home Educated]

Title: *My Golden Horseshoes*

A gust of wind blew in as the door was yanked open. A big man stormed in, coming upon me quickly. "Your father round, boy?" He barked. I dropped my load of wood in the box and looked up and up, until I reached his brutal face. Was this the man everyone talked about? 'Big' Johnston, the owner of Woolshed goldfields richest claim?

Fortunately, Pa saved me from answering, "Well Johnston, what can I do for you?" Wiping his grimy hands on his apron, Pa stoked up the fire.

Johnston peered impatiently down his nose. "I want a set of golden horseshoes made," he harrumphed.

"Golden horseshoes!" I gasped. The price would be enough to build the Grand Hotel!

"With the voting being on Saturday, I need them by then," Johnston stated. "Who are you voting for anyway, Elmer's? Everyone who's decent is goin' Cameron."

Pa wasn't to be roped in though. "You got the gold, Johnston? I'm sure I can have them done by late Friday."

Johnston unbuttoned his coat and fished out a hessian bag. "Don't go getting any ideas of selling it on or you'll be a dead man. I've got eyes all over this town, people sneeze and I know about it. I'm not accusing you of not being straight, Elmers, just that gold's worth a lot of money."

"I'll not interested in your gold, Johnston," Pa asserted. "I'll send John around with them Friday, when I'm finished. No-one would suspect a boy to be carrying such a prize."

Johnston thrust the bag at Pa and strode towards the door. "Make sure you do a good job."

Pa started to untie the string. "Wealth often leads to pride, son. Not someone I'd want to be. Big's alright, just thinks he runs the place."

I clutched the bag closer to my chest and straightened my shoulders with a sigh. The horseshoes were getting heavy, more from the burden of responsibility rather than their weight. Even though I carried the bag under my shirt I still felt exposed.

Suddenly, I came out of the timber and into the goldfields. All I could see were men bent over the creek, in their black woollen trousers, sluice boxes and pans in action. They were Monkeys, wet diggers just as Johnston was. Lately there had been a lot of rivalry between the Monkeys and the Punchers, the dry diggers, over voting. They had always been at odds with each other, but the tension right now had become unbearable.

I could only make out one man I knew, Li Chang was a regular at Pa's shop. As I made my way down the bank towards him, a slightly hunched man turned around from the creek bed. "Huoll boy. What brings you 'ere?" He questioned.

"I'm after Johnston," I answered, cocking my head to one side as the rushing water streamed about my bare feet.

Suddenly Pa's warning came into my head again, "Don't tell anyone about those horseshoes. It might cost you your life. Don't take chances."

The man leaned over with his pan and shouted, "I saw 'im over at 'is claim this mornin'. Just up over the next 'ill it is."

"Thanks," I nodded heading off.

The man called after me, "You 'eard about 'is horseshoes?"

I turned around and yelled back, "Yes. Outright waste of money, I'd say." My heart had quickened at the mention of the shoes and it took all my strength to stop myself from racing up the hill.

Finally, I came across Johnston. The big man grinned as I reached into my shirt. Only then did I let out the breath, I hadn't realised I'd been holding.

"Whoa," Pa shouted to Bess. I jumped down from the dray and hitched Bess to the post. Pa climbed down, taking his hessian bag full of tools. He shouldered the bag and strode around the back of the hotel.

"Bout time, you were here," I heard Johnston's booming voice as Pa disappeared from my view. I soon came into the courtyard, where stood a proud horse. There was fire in his eyes and courage rippled through his body. I saw Pa look sideways at him as he swung his work tools off his shoulder and proceeded to unpack it.

Although I had my doubts about this horse, he managed to stay still as Pa shod him. Pa was packing away his tools as a well turned out gentleman strode into the courtyard.

I stared at him in disbelief, surely this must be Daniel Cameron. Johnston clapped me on the back laughing, "It's not everyday you get to meet the Victorian Legislative Council's Member for Ovens, is it?"

Cameron responded heartily, "I sure hope your right Johnston, but we best let the vote take place first." He laughed as he added, "We are meant to be a democratic nation, remember." Then turning to Pa he asked, "Is this the horse?"

"Sure is Cameron, finest beast I've seen around here in years," Pa asserted. Pa would know too, he's the only blacksmith for miles.

"Com' on," Johnston demanded. "Better get a move on, town will be more then alive soon."

The town was abuzz with the excitement of voting day. Clean-shaven miners roamed the streets. Dogs barked. Women in cotton dresses chatted. Drays and carts clattered down the street. Barefoot children ran here and there as shopkeepers shouted their wares.

Suddenly, William 'Tinker' Brown appeared on the hotel's balcony. Tinker was the Puncher's hope and they were soon chanting his name. However, the chanting was soon to cease as a murmur ran through the crowd.

The assembled crowd parted, as making his way towards the Grand Hotel, appeared Daniel Cameron riding the horse clad in the golden horseshoes. Gasps of disbelief run through the crowd. Then cheers went up and the town erupted into chaos.

Finally, once order had been restored and the crowd settled, voting began. "Can I have a show of hands for William Tinker Brown," ordered Judge Bradshaw from the hotel balcony. A swarm of hands were raised.

Eventually, the call was repeated for Daniel Cameron, I heard a cheer go up beside me as Pa raised his hand. I'd had the feeling all along that it was Cameron he was backing.

A thrill ran down my spine as Cameron was later announced winner. I would forever remember the events that lead to the election of Daniel Cameron and of the part we'd played with the golden horseshoes.

YEAR 9-10 CATEGORY

Year 9-10 Winner: Tayah Spalding [Victory Lutheran College]

Title: *Summer Tragedy*

I don't know how or when it arrived, but it did. The jet ski floated on the water as the waves swayed it. Since I was little, motorized enjoyment vehicles were just not my thing. I had no reason for it, but it was just not. So instantly when I heard a jet ski would be coming, I knew I would not want a turn. My mother would already know this. Most all of everyone would know this.

Time passed and while the owner of the jet ski gave my brother a turn, I felt uneasy but stay in the comfort of my own mother. No matter how much my brother enjoyed each turn my gut feeling didn't ease. Eventually I was asked. I confidently declined listening to myself and how I was truly feeling. But the values of our family and the sad sob story of the driver... I was highly requested to have a turn. How could I say no to a man whose family left him? So with extreme amounts of hesitation, I got on the jet ski and said goodbye to my own life.

Before entering the open waters, the man asked how I was feeling. "uneasy" I said. "Please don't go too fast". He nodded and I felt no more relief than before. When we hit the open water, I clenched my hands on the side of the jet ski as he revved it almost making it parallel to the water. He sped off dodging trees, land and boats. I just wanted to scream at him to stop but I was too busy trying to hang on. As he turned and weaved I was grateful that I didn't fall off the side and get sucked up under near the jet ski. I don't know if his adrenaline

was pumping or he was thinking of his own trauma. But he was getting rough. He started creating tight circles to then he jumped the new waves that were created...All of a sudden, he took off and that's when I fell.

I remember opening my eyes as I was floating on the water. Crazy pain was shooting in my stomach, and I realized he had left me here. All I could do was yell. I yelled for my mother. I yelled for my father. But I gave up quickly. No one would hear me. No one would notice me. I thought I could swim back to land and run to my parents. But the pain was too excessive for that.

I don't remember how much long after, but he came back. He chuckled jokingly as I sobbed to him. I don't think he realised the damage that was done. He jumped in the water beside me trying to calm me now. I was irritated, the limited words I was able to get out were not enough to convince him. After a lot of chatter (just from him) he let me back on. Driving off to our camp spot I leant my head into his back wishing I had just listened to myself in the beginning. Eventually we got close enough to see mum sitting on land. He waved at her trying to get her attention, but she just smiled and continued listening to music. It wasn't till he yelled out that she came racing over. I jumped off in a rush to her, but my leg gave in, and I fell to the ground vomiting uncontrollably. She held me up trying to support my body weight. I was carried onto the grass where I was put in a recovery position. Mum could tell it was awful. As calming as, she could in the moment she tried to signal to the adults that it was bad. Nana rung triple zero, but it would take too long. "THERE'S NO TIME!" Dad yelled while scooped me up and placing me in the back seat of our car. We needed to get to hospital NOW!

It was a long but short drive. I continuously took short sharp breaths to help control the agony. Between that I was vomiting all over the floor. Mum had to roll me over so I would chock on spew. Every 5 minutes my quiet voice asked "how much longer?". My parents didn't help ease me. They argued back and forward trying to find the best option for my health. I was too disconnected though. I couldn't tell them to stop. I had nothing else left in me.

When we arrived, I felt people pull my body out of the car and place me in a wheelchair. I hunched over clenching my stomach. My body began uncontrollably shaking. My body was in shock. Mum tried to calm me down talking to me as doctors and nurses urgently pushed me around trying to come up with some sort of testing. I don't know where I went. All I could focus on were voices. I've never been introduced to so many doctors and nurses. Once we arrived in the room the nurses quickly lifted me on the bed where I was constrained to lay flat on my back. What they didn't realise at the time was they were increasing the poison in my body by laying me down. A neck brace was strapped around my neck and I had many nurses holding me down. Cannulas were placed in my arms, and they immediately began doing ultrasounds. The Wodonga Hospital had no clue what was wrong. But my mum kept insisting that something wasn't right. No matter how much I asked they refused to give me pain relief. After being stripped of all my clothing and feeling completely violated of my privacy I was placed in a gown. Against my will. I was taken off for an MRI which as easy as that sound was very painfully. As soon as they realised what had happened... the immediately called for an ambulance as I needed to be transferred NOW!

I remember trying to get out of the bed thinking I'd have to hop into the ambulance. But like before I had nurses holding me down again. Once I was in the van safely mum hoped in to. As soon as we drove off the paramedic comfortingly spoke to me "Can I give you pain relief darl? It might help you calm down". I nodded aggressively. Once he did, I felt at peace. "Thank you, thank you". I said slowly but meaningfully. I felt like sleeping but they wouldn't let me. It was such a calming drive. It didn't feel too short or too long. It was just right. Mum held my hand soothingly all the way until we arrived at Albury's ER. I don't remember what

happened when I got there but I remember arriving in theatre. Theatre is their operation rooms/ward. As scary as it should have been, I was too drugged to understand what was going to happen. I stared at my mother confusingly. "It will be ok Tayah; they are going to help you ok". My mum tried to comfort me as I would soon realise what was taking place.

Bright lights shone in my eyes as I was placed on the operation table. I was scared that I would wake up through my unknown surgery. None of the doctors knew what they were going to do. They just knew that something had to be done now. But before I could even have a panic attack I was out.

Waking up from a surgery feels like just blinking your eyes for a second. It feels like no time has passed when really for everyone 7 hours had passed. Waking up I couldn't comprehend what had happen. I was scared but too tired to do anything about it. The doctors spoken to me as if we were friends. "Hi Tayah, how are you feeling? You still craving that coke?". They all knew me...but I knew none of them. But brain had given up trying to figure out who they were and just learnt to accept them. In the moment I hated it, but now I'm grateful that it helped me overcome most of my social anxiety.

Doctors, nurses and specialist walked in lifting up my shirt to review my scar. I had no interest in it. I didn't want to see it. Although I couldn't see it anyways as I was unable to move from my bed. If I hadn't been drugged up, I would have lost my mind laying there for days on end. But I was and had just tolerated it. Even to this day I struggle. I struggle with resting, not being able to do sports like I use to and even the pain that constantly follows me every single day. As time went on and I looked physically well people stopped bothering. They stopped checking in. They lost the understanding for how well I could do things. They assumed I was lazy. But honestly, I was more tired than ever. So, to all you readers. While yeah, the person is well and getting back into life doesn't mean they are ok. Both mental and physical pain is following them, and they are feeling more isolated than ever. Their trauma is haunting them and controlling their life. But of course, they're not going to say anything because they are supposed to be grateful for this experience even though it ripped the light out of life for them. So, give them a break, and remember, you never truly know what someone is going through so treat everyone like they are going through hell.

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Brock Powell [Billabong High School]

Title: *The Man*

This was a relatively warm Saturday afternoon for the season. I was thankful for this, even though I was to be in a car with air conditioning most of the day. Me and my partner, Sam, were out patrolling the streets of Lavington. Our light blue button up shirts and badges identified us to the locals. Sam wore his bulletproof vest over it. We had a picture of a wanted man on the dashboard to look at to compare a suspect to if he was brought to our attention. We cruised around the streets, keeping an eye out for activity that could imply crime. The man we were looking for has done it in broad daylight before. He was not afraid. Heartless, yes, but brave. It's been 3 months now and in that time, 5 victims have been identified. All children aged 10 to 17. Terrible.

Sam leaned slightly over to me, he was driving. "Think we're gonna catch him soon?" He inquired. "I think so. His picture's up. He can't hide from everyone, and they're all on high alert. Though I do worry that if the public finds him first he won't be alive by the time we get

there. Not that he doesn't deserve all they'd do to him but we can't let that happen, obviously."
"I hear you man."

As we continued on our way a voice came over our radios. "All units in the area, we have reports of a suspect at Baranbale Way. In a brown jacket and blue baggy jeans. Any available units please investigate."

I picked up the radio and held the button in, "copy, on our way".

Sam swerved the cruiser around, making the tyres screech and simultaneously switching on the lights and sirens as he sped down the road to Baranbale.

We arrived quickly and located the suspect who had begun anxiously looking over his shoulder at the cruiser and walking at a fast pace in the opposite direction on the sidewalk with his hood up covering his head and face.

Sam slowly drove towards him, coming up next to him and continuing at the same speed as the man. He glanced over at us and I saw that he had a light brown moustache. I looked over at the photograph of the serial murder suspect that we were searching for who had no facial hair, and dark curly hair. I looked over at Sam and said "it's the wrong guy, but we'll see what he's up to anyway."

I put my window down and looked at him. "Stop walking mate."

The man turned his head to me again and then turned back. He seemed to be considering his next move. We continued following him for a few metres before he decided to stop. We pulled over and got out. I walked over to him, said hello and began asking him what he was up to.

"Have you had anything to drink recently?"

"I had a beer this morning but I haven't driven."

"Alright. Have you taken anything illicit?" "Never."

"Okay. Good. So is there a reason you put your hood up when we approached you?"

"Well I've got a record. Nothing serious but I wasn't sure if I had done something wrong I didn't realise I did or not."

"Alright so what's your full name?"

"Aaron Singleton."

"Thank you, me and my partner Senior Contestable Bradley will search your name up on the system, just a quick check you know. Wait here please we'll get back to you in a minute." The man nodded and took a seat on the curb.

We searched his name on the police system and located him. His record consisted of minor offences. Nothing serious as he stated. We got back out of the car and told him he's right to go.

"Have a good day" Sam told him as we got back into the cruiser and left, lights and sirens off. The rest of the day was uneventful and soon enough our shift ended. We drove back to the station, said our goodbyes and went our separate ways. A few hours later I was at my home.

My wife and children were in bed, I was on the couch watching a movie and relaxing. We lived in a nice house, a very fortunate family. My daughter is 14, my son 12. As I sat there fixated on the carnage on the TV screen I couldn't stop thinking about the murderer on the loose. My phone began ringing and I snapped back to reality. I had received a call asking to come back in for an emergency situation, as many units as possible were needed. The suspect had been spotted.. and another victim had been identified.

I quickly jumped up off my couch and dressed myself, collecting my equipment and kissing my wife and children goodbye. I sent a text to my wife's phone so if she awoke in the night

she'd know where I was. I sprinted to my car, turned the ignition on and made my way to the station. There I hopped into a cruiser which Sam had already started and with lights and sirens blaring accelerated towards the location given to us. We passed another unit headed in a slightly different direction to us in an attempt to cut the suspect off. Continuing slightly down the road I spotted a man fitting the description we had received, though he did not look our way. "Stop here!"

I told Sam. He slammed in the brakes, skidding to a stop and I got out. "Keep going, I'll keep you updated"

"Righto, good luck."

It was a cold, dark winter night. I could feel the painfully freezing winter air rushing over my ears, my head was kept relatively warm thanks to my cap, though that didn't stop the air feeling like thousands of tiny, sharp needles piercing my face as I ran. Ice cold water splashed onto my navy blue cargo pants, soaking through in some places onto my legs as I sprinted and stomped through puddles in my tactical Magnum boots. My leather jacket bearing the New South Wales Police Force emblem on its sleeves was the only thing keeping my torso and arms warm as I continued pursuing the man.

"Stop!" I shouted after him, but I was met with no response. I reached to my shoulder where my radio was clipped and held the button down, saying

"Requesting immediate backup from all units in the area, in pursuit of suspect on foot heading Southwest past the Lavington Square shopping centre" the radio fell silent for a few seconds before another voice came over it announcing "copy, 3 units coming to your assistance, ETA in 2 minutes".

I continued giving chase to the man, it was becoming more difficult to see him as his dark clothing blended with the night and the surrounding area, but I focused on his shoes which had a slightly reflective shine on the back of them. He vaulted over a wooden fence into someone's back yard and I followed suit. I updated the officers coming to help me over the radio as to where the chase was taking place. "Stop or I am authorised to use force!" I yelled after him. I didn't want to have to use my taser but this man needed to be put locked away, a man who murdered 6 children should never have taken this long to catch up to, nor should he ever see the light of day again. He was smart, we didn't have his real name as he went by multiple aliases.

In the distance the sound of sirens and the dim but approaching flashing of red and blue police lights became louder and more apparent. My backup was here. We're finally going to get him. "Stop!" I yelled once more as he began jumping over another fence. He refused and so in response I reached into my utility belt and unsheathed the taser it held. I slowed down to aim it and pulled the trigger, firing it into his back and sending 50,000 volts through his body, temporarily paralysing him. He fell to the floor off the fence and landed on the damp, muddy grass underneath. Once again I reached for my radio and spoke into it to update the officers who were coming to help me: "suspect has been immobilised, on the grass out front of a property on Darke Street. Moving to apprehend."

"Copy" was the reply from the closest unit. I jumped the fence and landed swiftly next to the man on the floor. I reached back into my utility belt and grabbed my handcuffs. I applied them firmly to his wrists, kneeling on his back so he couldn't get up and run. I sat him up and frustratedly pulled the hood of his head. What I saw shook me to my core.. it was him. This was the man who had inflicted so much pain on innocent people and their families. Countless people affected by his actions.

"You are under arrest for six counts of murder. Anything you say or do from here on out can and will be used against you in the court of law. You have the right to remain silent. Do you understand?"

He looked up at me, his piercing gaze burning into my soul. He opened his cracked lips and answered "yes" in a horrible hoarse voice.. the voice of a demon

Year 9-10 Runner-Up: Charlie Pinard [Catholic College Wodonga]

Title: *She*

She is just gone fifteen. She is average height and lean. She has olive skin and soft facial features - along with full, healthy lips - framed by dark curly hair that drops three inches below her shoulders.

She lives in a small historic town with a family that fill their house with cooking and books, she can write stories that will break your heart and shatter your soul.

She has too many quiet passions that are slowly growing louder as she gets older - singing, advocacy and powerful feminist views. She can cook food that will make your stomach melt with delight and can cry rivers of emotion over the smallest blips, remain stoic in the direst of circumstances, and offer effective advice when it is least expected.

She is an A student, but not always. Teachers love her, even if they don't always let her know that.

Boys don't look at her at school, but it doesn't bother her. Instead, they share secrets with the fake blondes, painted with orange tans and masks of makeup.

She has a secret of her own, too.

She almost has a boy with mouse-brown hair and blue eyes that brighten or darken depending on his emotion. A boy who surprises her when he invites her - of all people - to parties and dances. A boy who holds out his hand and then gently encloses it around her long, thin fingers, leading her out into the mostly badly done waltzes of all time. A boy who smells of aniseed and laundry and teenage years. A boy who blushes unexpectedly and carries his religion with him like a lifeboat. A boy who offers laughter at her awkward jokes and concern in her long silences.

A boy who she has no idea likes her.

But she knows he does.

And he knows. But he's too scared. So, he breaks her heart. He shatters her soul. Her quiet passions and her gentle beauty. He takes it in his impossibly soft hands and smashes it all on the ground.

Now she cries every night. His eyes swim across her dreams. Her grades tumble down the ladder when his voice echoes across her hippocampus in exams.

She internally screams every time she sees him. Her chest hurts every time their skin brushes, and as she watches him drift away, she sobs with everything she wished she said.

But she'll never say it.

Because deep down, she knows she isn't beautiful. She isn't smart. She's everything she wishes she isn't. The moment he leaves her, she falls into that bad, dark place.

Because he was her flashlight. Her lantern. The one who *saw her*.

But he's gone. He left her because he was scared about how she made him feel. And yeah, she's scared too. But the longing she feels is so much worse than anything could be if she could have him.

Because the awful truth is, the truth she whispers to herself in the deep darkness of night, she loves him.

She loves him with everything in her. She would die for him. She would give up anything just to be in his arms. To feel his breath on her neck. To feel his love. The love he's ignoring. The love she carries with her every day like a crushing weight on her shoulders. With no one to give it to.

But don't worry, this story has a happy ending.

She realises suddenly that she shouldn't be picking what she wants to be, she should be picking who she wants to be.

And she doesn't want to be the person she is right now. She wants to be a strong, independent woman. And to do that she doesn't need this boy. She only needs herself, and hell, she already has that.

YEAR 11-12 CATEGORY

Year 11-12 Winner: Ruby Kane [Albury High School]

Title: *Omerta*

2230

The night matures, yet the searing dry heat continues to bore into my back. I distantly recall my visits to Calabria. My body yearns for the regulated Mediterranean climate as a droplet of sweat trickles slowly down my vertebrae. Griffith is okay. People try to tell me you should feel an affiliation for home. You should be connected to your birthplace, to the extent that you would kill to protect it. I don't care for the cracking dirt paths, the tumbleweeds rolling past in the hot wind, or the sprawling families that call this inferno of a town home.

2300

The sharp grinding sound of rubber tyres on gravel reaches in and pulls me from my thoughts. I wait carefully, alert like a squirrel watching a group of loud humans.

Silence.

I'm waiting for my family to come back from their road trip to Melbourne. My task is simple. Help them unpack. Theoretically speaking, within the next half an hour I should see the headlights of a green *Western Star* hauling a large, rusting shipping container. The container is carrying peeled tomato cans. My hands are shaking like leaves and a nauseous feeling builds in the dark pit of my stomach. The 'Ndrangheta don't get scared. But I'm afraid. Fear creates a lump in the back of my throat, forming warm tears that prickle in the corners of my eyes,

threatening to spill over. I inhale sharply and release the air slowly, trying to slow my racing heartbeat.

Unload the caps and Little Trees might see you as valuable. The simple phrase rings through my ears repeatedly. It is comforting.

2330

I didn't see any truck.

That's what Little Trees told me to say. I can neither confirm nor deny its accuracy. I guess I can try some other way of telling you what actually happened to me, but Little Trees can't find out. Or anyone in my family.

2030

The sound of 3000 tomato tins rattling together for three hours kills more brain cells than snorting three lines of cocaine. The rhythmic vibrations of the shipping container reverberate through my body. It's warm in the container; the air is thick and musty inside my lungs. I was never good at staying focused. Even as a little boy, my mind wandered, and my dad would get so frustrated he had no other choice but to land a swift blow to the back of my head. The deep potholes and scars in the road remind me of why I started calling him Little Trees. It all happened very quickly, one day Padre turned to Francesco, and then it was Little Trees. I was in the business. My dad's reputation stems from his cannabis cultivation expertise.

Sirens begin screaming and howling from behind the truck, followed by rushing wind generated by the rotating blades of two, maybe three helicopters. Not an ideal situation. My brain decides to picture my gruesome and bloody death as the authorities open the doors of the container, revealing a small Italian sitting amongst fifteen million concealed MDMA tablets. I am not alarmed. There is nothing I can do. I must accept the inevitable and painful *decesso*.

Experimenting with versions of reality is far simpler than candour. If I tell you a story, then I can control its ending. I'll be honest now, I'm ready to tell the truth. Just promise not to tell my dad.

1800

The night is in its infancy. I look up as the cobalt sky begins to fade to azure. That's my signal. A radio in my right breast pocket crackles, settling into the voice of my father.

"Pat, entrare nel container per l'inventario dal lato destro." He pauses momentarily, but the line on the radio remains open. "Stai attento, figliolo."

1830

My biceps groan and burn deeply as I open the heavy, rusting shipping container doors. The walls of the container are lined with *I Rossi* tins, peeled tomatoes in tomato juice. A clipboard has been concealed behind one wall of tins, with a page for me to count and record the stock.

1900

My hands work impetuously, but my mind isn't in it. I remember the white sand between my toes on the pristine beach of Tropea and the towering cliffs and the mellow turquoise waters glistening in the sunshine. For a moment, I can feel the cool sea breeze tickling my cheeks and ruffling my hair.

"On the ground, NOW."

I can't tell if I am lying anymore. Everything becomes a lie when you can't remember the truth. Even if I could remember, I would pay for honesty with my life. I can't afford that just yet.

Year 11-12 Runner-Up: Lylah Ellao [The Scots School Albury]

Title: *Bosver*

Translation: To let it go.

Dedicated to those whose lives are divided by the earthquakes of Türkiye, as well as those who try to help piece them back together, despite cultural barriers that seemingly render this gap all the wider.

Yesterday I woke up to find that my family did not.

Five children.

I had five children, right? The overseas relief people tell me 'no'. But they must know better; I never went to school.

But two of my children did.

He was going to be a writer, my middle son; I never told him, but I really loved how he read out the fairy tales and rhymes from his expensive school textbooks when he came home from his classes, reciting in perfect English whilst I brewed a peppermint tea for everyone. *Like Adalet Ağaoğlu*, he said. *Or Tee—Mr Tee Elliot*. And I would smile, proud. Though I understand it well, my own English is very bad. I never asked what *she* wanted to be. But then, my daughter was only about four, that I am certain of.

Now their school lies in bricks at my feet.

I tell one of the relief people from overseas that their school lies in bricks at my feet. I show them my temple where it hit me as it fell. I ask where my children are.

The person gives me water, says, "it helps with cosmimidicosis laurange, the sollimpatdico maaloop fippto keene, and the pain."

I drink.

She appraises the five birth certificates I gave her thirty minutes ago.

"So remind me, your children... millsop hibernim clapkit bureautomatically opelnate legal?"

I nod.

Then she answers my question.

"Can you evidevideenieproovattle these are your children?"

I'm not sure how much longer I can pretend she hasn't become *The Big Friendly Giant* straight to my face.

Surprised? I am too; I only know the book because my son read it to me. But it must've been a good book with a good moral, because I remember it. I remember it.

The woman reads the concern on my particularly brown face. "We're trying to be reasonable here, you understand?" I don't. "Good, well then, tell me about..." she makes the same sound as a cricket's hind legs discovering it is being watched by a bird as she leafs through her pocket dictionary. "... your four children."

Ah, yes. My four children.

I look vacantly over her shoulder to where Kavish, my neighbour, lies his two daughters in the Türkic sand; God's vintage passion has turned to vinegar. I thought their names were Mileesh, after her grandmother who bred mules and could sing beautifully, and Kap, because it's a beautiful name. But I must've been mistaken. Everyone is calling them by the numbers tied in tags to their toes.

The rustling of papers snaps me from vacuity: the relief lady has passed two of the documents that I gave her to another relief person—they must've been numbers as well. Not names. Not children. Not children of mine, anyway.

I evaluate the two papers left in her hands. My two children.

"Their names are Aya and 'Baby'. I am giving you these names so you can find my two children. Please."

"We goothing traimlialish veerlinghurde meesawewheel easy for you," The relief lady says baiting exasperation, as though rarely hearing my words for want of getting hers out; she measures out and slows each word as she speaks, careful as wedding wine, and produces a single page on my lap. It seems familiar. But I must be mistaken. "It would be easier if you gave us names so we can find your child, but let's start here."

A map twitches on the page. Lines run everywhere like baby snakes lying one on top of other in sleeves of heat; So badly did I want to strike that map with a stick. They looked more like Sanskrit words than a picture of Istanbul. But there are too many callouses on my hands now, and I'm so tired; so desperately I wanted my life to simply shed its dress and flow through the stones.

"My four children everywhere!" I wanted to scream, "Baby's foot is under what used to be the bedroom walls, his sister's arm is under the roof, their souls are trying to drift up from under rocks but keep getting run over by the red trucks you keep bringing in! Of course I can't tell you where I last saw them!" Yes, that I am sure of. I look up to address the lady. She is on her phone now.

I mean—I run it over in my head. Stallion-like. *I remember my daughter, Aya; she ran to me because the television had just issued an earthquake warning.*

I point to my kitchen and house at the intersection of two snakes on the map. The relief lady smiles, nods, seemingly impressed that I know where I live. Says something to her phone, which chitters away on her shoulder like a black beetle with its wings folded in. *And Baby was*

in my arms, that I am sure of. I could never forget the baby. That is most important. That I know for certain.

"Ma'am, it says here, patreematree-ansastry pseodoclimb justificalliquivocally you are sixteen."

Sixteen! That old? I almost forget the irritancy of the woman in my shock. Almost. If *my* mother were still alive, she'd say something like 'you have another ten children left in you!' I pray for my mother.

The second page must be mine; I chuckle inside: *my* numbers. but if what the foreign relief woman says is true, and it must be—the earthquake swallowed up most things into the footfalls of the earth, but found my frugal intelligence impalatable, it seems—then, I am just a child myself; do I recall a classroom, a mother with my name baking on her lips and flatbreads and rosemary—a luxury, rosemary—doing the same on the coals? Do I still cycle through nostalgia like washing-donkey around a well still, hoping the colours don't run away, knowing wholly in the fingers of my strong wheatgrass tethers I will not be able to chase them anyway?

She hands me one of the documents, expectant. So I speak.

"I'm sorry, I don't know where this child is. If I had one, maybe I might."

The relief lady from overseas stood up, red dust departing her bright red vest as though bored of settling onto such an inert surface: the debris around us moved even more, frittering with this tactical, tidal rearrangement that didn't rest for a single moment.

"That's okay, ma'am. Ahash returoutback fillventfile tidge a mother bacyclat."

As I dug for sleep, bandages finally butterfly-settled on the 'amnesiac concussion'—more foreign relief person gibberish, for all I know for certain—on my temple, I couldn't help but wonder two things: firstly, what it would feel like to have children, and secondly, if I'd wake up yesterday again.

