



Write It Out

Greater Dandenong Short Story Competition 2026



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Illustration | Winner

People Soup

By Alice Huijbregts



“

People Soup is a colourful illustration featuring jellybean-like people from around the globe.

Inspired by my experience of moving to Dandenong, this artwork celebrates the community, cultures, food, music, and dance that helped me feel at home.

The bright colours and playful movement reflect the energy and connections I experience every day.

”

A Celebration of Young Voices

This compilation of stories from the 2026 Write It Out: Greater Dandenong Short Story Competition celebrates the creativity, imagination and unique perspectives of young people across our community. Stories have the power to connect, challenge and help make sense of the world around us. Within these pages, the voices of young people from Greater Dandenong shine through with imagination and creativity, offering readers a collection of stories that are as diverse and vibrant as the community they represent.

The 2026 Write It Out Competition attracted 106 entries across three age categories, each offering a distinct perspective, innovative ideas, and a passion for storytelling. The breadth and quality of submissions reflect not only the literary and artistic abilities of our young people, but also their willingness to express themselves, explore new ideas, and connect with others through creative work.

Participants were invited to respond creatively to a series of prompts through their short stories and illustrations. The themes included A Whole New World, Home Away from Home, Looking Forward to the Future, and A City of Many Colours, inspiring young people to explore their ideas and experiences in unique and engaging ways.

The stories featured represent the winning entries across the competition's three age categories. Complimenting these stories are illustrations by young artists, whose creativity and talent bring an additional depth to the collection.

This publication would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and dedication of every participant. We extend our sincere thanks to all the young writers and artists who shared their creativity with us, and to the families, teachers, mentors and community members who encouraged and supported them throughout their creative journey.

Our appreciation is further extended to Readings and the Emerging Writers' Festival, whose support of the competition prize pool helped celebrate and reward young people for their achievements.

We are proud to present this collection and congratulate all participants and winners of the Write it Out Competition.

**Greater Dandenong Youth and Family Services
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Readings

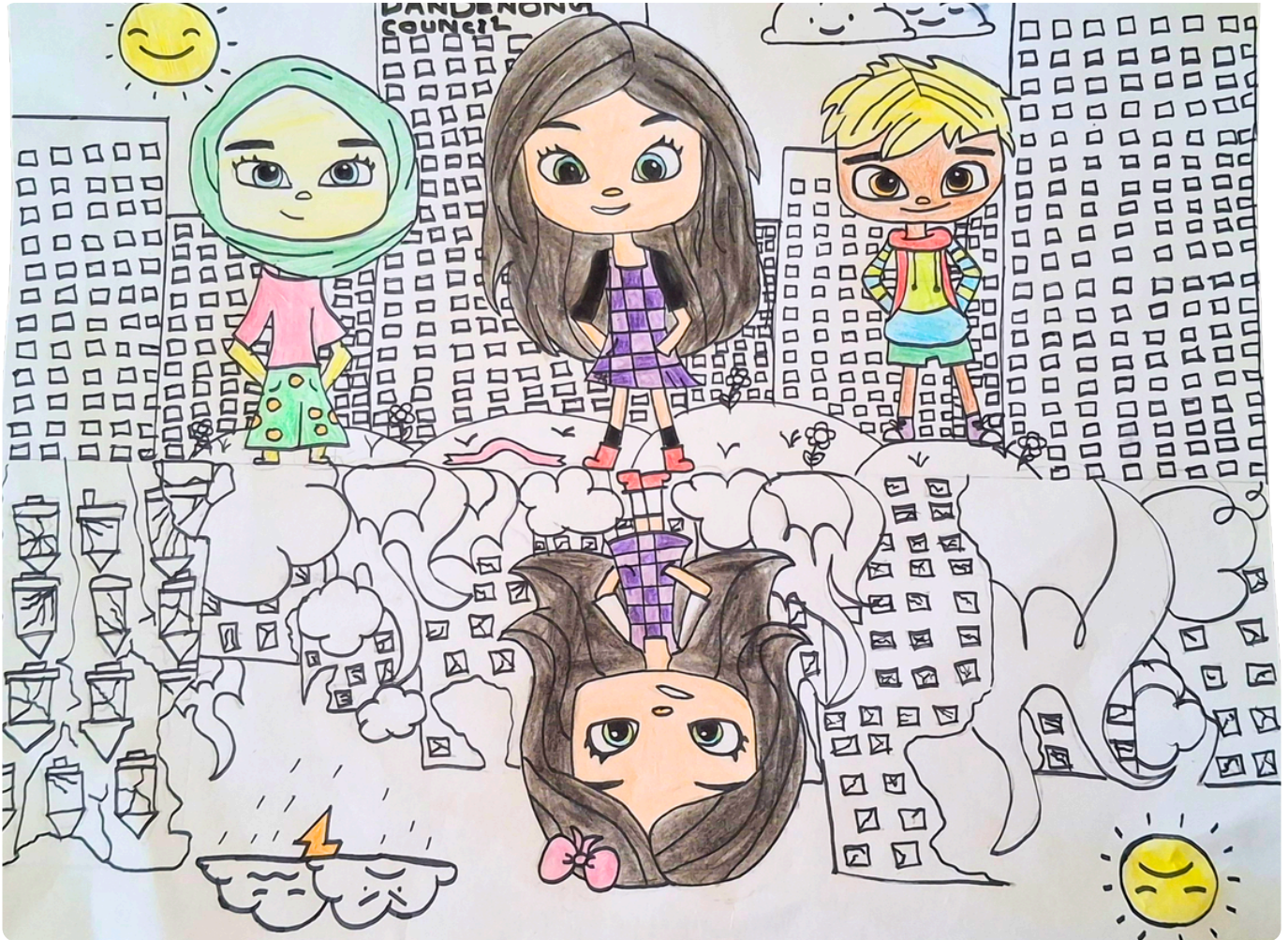
**EMERGING
WRITERS'
FESTIVAL**

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Home away from home

By Neriah Algama



“

After escaping conflict, Raasa comes to Dandenong looking for a safe place to live. In the land of the gum trees, she discovers friendship, community, and support from people of many different backgrounds. The artwork celebrates the power of connection, feeling of finding a place where you belong and being proud to be an Australian.

”

A Wake, Awake

by Audrey Sze



Mingda lived in a quiet museum of a language that his children no longer knew how to inherit. The house guarded Mingda's silence. Inside, dried orange peels and incense drowned the air. Portraits of ancestors lined the hallway, staring down into rooms where the loudest sound was the hum of a refrigerator. On the paint-peeling wall, a traditional Chinese tear-away calendar remained stuck on a date that had occurred years ago. The sight of it reminded Mingda of his old home in Beijing. Mingda's heart ached. Sometimes he wished his family hadn't insisted on bringing him to the quiet suburbs of Melbourne with them.

The chirp of the phone sliced through the silence. On the oak table, his daughter's name pulsed in a pale glow. He didn't answer. As the screen went black, a heavy suffocating silence rushed back like a damp woollen blanket. There were no snapshots of smiling faces or crayon masterpieces pinned to the fridge. He had two children and five grandchildren, but when he searched his mind for a memory of a party, the scent of birthday candles, or the chaos of a song, he found only a vast grey void.

Later that day, Mingda went outside to take the trash out. In the bin, he came across a peculiar, heavy artefact resembling a clock. The afternoon sun reflected off its metallic surface into his glasses. A web of cracks crawled across its protective glass cover, hiding the numbers beneath. On any other day, Mingda would've walked past. However, the Chinese newspaper he had read this morning had warned: "Opportunity must not be lost; time will not come again". He sighed. What harm could it do? He strained his back to pick it up, chuckling to himself.

Back inside, he sat at the table to inspect it. It had no hands, only numbers across three dials. The first read 7, the second 07, and the final slot held 2026. Today's date. Mingda fiddled with the third dial with his calloused thumb. It turned with a click, rolling forward to 2036.

Instantly, the air grew frigid. The refrigerator's hum ceased, replaced by a whine vibrating through the floorboards. Mingda gasped, gripping the table as the world blurred. Outside the window, the familiar Springvale streets blurred as the golden afternoon sun streaked across the sky like a shooting star, flashing into darkness, then blinding light, then darkness again as if seasons were flying by.

The whine faded into an eerie silence. The air no longer smelled of orange peels but rather reeked of stagnant air, cold dust, and loneliness. Mingda coughed, the sound echoing sharply through the empty house. His footsteps left perfect prints in a grey carpet of dust. Everything was exactly where he left it, yet completely unrecognisable. The kitchen counter was covered in mould where a decade-old bowl of rice sat, and the table felt like it would snap if he leaned on it. On the wall, the yellowed calendar edges curled inward like dead leaves. No one had cleaned. No one had visited.



The house had simply been left to die, and something told Mingda he had done this to himself. He stumbled through the rusted gates of the community cemetery under a dull, grey sky. It didn't take him long to find his name. He couldn't read the English text on the surrounding headstones, but he recognised the Chinese characters of his own name.

The sight made his breath catch. There were no bouquets, no food, and no incense. The earth above him was choked with thorny weeds. His glass photograph was shattered. A spiderweb split his face in two, half of his smile lost in the dirt. To the world, he wasn't just dead, he was completely erased. He touched the cracked stone, realizing the grey void in his mind had finally become real.

Mingda used the last of his strength to go to his daughter's house. They lived in a bright house in Keysborough, surrounded by private schools. Mingda tiptoed to the window, squinting to get a good look.

Through the window, he watched them. The room was filled with the warm but foreign chaos. His grey-streaked daughter poured tea while his grandchildren laughed, their voices enveloped with joy. The walls were covered in snapshots of beach vacations, but Mingda's face was nowhere to be seen. There was no family altar, no space held for his memory. They spoke quickly in a language he could not understand. They were perfectly whole without him. He was a ghost standing in the dark, watching something he could never get.

Tears pricked Mingda's eyes. With shaking fingers, he rolled the dial of the pocket watch back. The freezing wind rushed over him again, the strobe light of decades reversing. Suddenly, the familiar fragrance of dried orange peels and incense filled his lungs. The refrigerator hummed its usual comforting tune. He was home.

Mingda hobbled toward the table. His phone was still pulsing with his daughter's missed call. For years, pride and a language barrier had kept him isolated, but he had seen the alternative of being completely forgotten. He pressed call.

The phone rang twice. "Hello?" his daughter's voice came through, sounding surprised. Mingda closed his eyes. He forced his throat to form the syllables of a language he had spent a lifetime avoiding.

"My child," Mingda whispered, his voice trembling. "Hello. I am okay. H-how are you?" There was a stunned silence, followed by a sharp intake of breath and a soft, watery laugh. "Baba," she said, her voice instantly lighting up. He could practically feel her smile even kilometres away. "You're speaking English?" "I'll try," Mingda smiled through his tears, looking up at the portraits of his ancestors.

For the first time in years, the heavy silence of the house did not rush back in. It was gone, chased away by the beautiful sound of a new beginning in a suburb with faces that looked like his.

Stories of a Book

by Zoe Casequin



The earliest memory I possessed was being brought to life by the sounds of rustling paper, the cold, binding feeling of glue and the darkness I endured after being enclosed in a dark void amidst other beings like myself.

I spent an indeterminable length of my life sitting in a lonely corner on the back shelf of a bookstore, away from the presence of people that entered it. Very seldom did one desire to venture to this obscured shelf, and when someone did, they simply picked me up and glimpsed at me only for a second before returning me to my original position. The days that passed felt like meaningless centuries wasting away, without any purpose to my lonely existence.

It was not until that one fateful day that I truly began to find purpose in living. That day could have been the same as any other except for the visit of an erudite young woman, wavering in stance at the hefty stack of books she was carrying with a single hand, struggling to reach out towards me as she tried to keep her balance. Was it true that someone genuinely wanted me, for the first time in my life? I pushed myself off the shelf determinedly, falling perfectly into her gentle, warm hand before I was placed carefully atop the stack of books and taken to the cashier. It only occurred to me that I had never felt that tingle of those peculiar lines on my back being scanned by that red beam, resulting in the sound of a beep – the whole experience brought an odd yet satisfying sensation. After the books that accompanied me underwent the same process, similar to how I was brought to the store, I once more was enveloped in pitch black darkness and trapped inside of a cardboard cage.

The sight of a light, blinding at first, had revealed to me a completely different universe to the one I knew. The new world that had opened itself to me was one that was bustling with life; people roamed freely in this world, while books of many kinds achieved the ultimate purpose to be read and treasured as a source of wonder and knowledge by them. Shelves filled to their limit and beyond with books lined the entire place, while the people that wandered, old and young, made full use of this sanctuary that was provided to them. The woman that had brought me here then placed me on a shelf amidst other books, displayed so that people would desire to read us.

Slowly, I began to get accustomed to my new home, or as the people call it, 'the library'. As the days passed, I started familiarising myself with the library workers and some of the regular visitors. Aside from people, there were many books of different genres that I had never met before. They all had their own story to tell, whether it was tragic, uplifting or biographical.

After a month, I had been 'borrowed' by a great variety and number of people, and had ultimately experienced the joy of being read. I had learnt that similar to books, humans held 'stories' of their own – they all had different appearances, interests and even lifestyles as I could observe from my momentary visit to their homes.

Even now, as I reminisce whilst on my shelf, I wonder what stories I may encounter next.

A House that Welcomes You

By Xyanelle Doroja



"Home sweet home". A phrase my family was supposedly in no position to say. "The model for idle vagabonds". Every trip was a forgotten memory, a past life. This "stay" was no different, that by the time the aged lady next door remembered my name, I would no longer be there to exchange greetings. "Greater Dandenong", was it? Or just one of the outgrown clothes when a child matures? My departure will pass just as briefly as my arrival.

Entering the house, I gritted my teeth as the clammy heat washed over me. Squinting through the marble-tiled hallway, I grasp sight of my mother and the tenant, discussing bills, housekeeping, the usual stuff. She was a laborious lady, almost too laborious – eyes sunken in their sockets, pale-as-bone skin, and a body that was unable to support the head directing it, all of which I could never understand. She once bore a promising character, but the skills that were once celebrated became neglected, and struggled to secure a permanent profession ever since. A nitpick about being "too foreign", as I see it.

Picture this. Wagering your finances and time into a child's education. Miraculously gaining an overseas opportunity despite living in the lowlife suburbs of nowhere Singapore. Reassured by charity-compliments from family because that is the only gift they can afford. Backtracking towards the starting line of a foreign race in order to grasp an opportune life. Only to stumble from a loose footing because of your grounding. The assembly yells, "Go back to where you belong, alien." That is our reality. Confined into a cycle, tossed to and fro by partiality and seeking the certificate of acceptance discarded years ago.

It's too heavy of a weight for me to carry.

I wasn't popular, but I wasn't alone. The customary reception of a primary school. The plastered grin of teachers as they trod past. The subtle coolness of my friend's hands around mine. Mirryia. Her ivory curls waltzing like ribbons in the wind. Her smile, a sharp line along the edge of her face. Her voice like honey, too sweet. Her kindness was the kind of pigment that those on the receiving end could never define nor erase. If only it lifted off a weight instead of adding another.

To my disbelief, the public were inviting these misfits who arose from a backwater background. I was in awe of their resolve in conversation, enough for me to question my own capacity. Golden-warm sunshine seeping through windows, conversations slowly occupying vacant spaces, and the flowery scent of cordial. My mother. Within a month, I witnessed a change. The same eyes who darkened lit in their place once more. Internal strength that subdued frailty. A drive to live. It seemed that a load was removed, but not by her. My mother couldn't lift it off as much as she desired. But how? She became a possibility. "Why don't you "find out for yourself?", she insisted.



The rain blurs Mirryia's approaching footsteps. "May I eat lunch with you?" she mutters, unease apparent in her overly playful tone. I nodded. Peering through the hazy window, I watch a tree tremble, the charcoal-painted sky bathing it with showers of rain and violent wind. The tree was just like me. More than the superhuman amidst me. "Hey," she whispers, her lips pursing into a tender smile, different to the plastic line I remember. The pause she took to bid her hesitation farewell. "Why do you distance yourself away from me? I mean, it's like being around people has no amusement at all." I stiffened. Grasping the desk, Mirryia stood up with haste movement, almost seeming like she was prepared to bow. "S-sorry."

"Because there's no use. If I try, there's no use. Who am I, an outsider, might be allowed the privilege of belonging? So there's no use.", I struggled to reply, avoiding her view as I pretended to stare at the seat beside us. Awaiting laughter, I tried to examine her expression. But it seemed that her eyes only narrowed and her smile faded. Her face leapt in front.

"Goodness, who's taught you that nonsense? And after all my effort in making friends with you. That said, there's no point barging in if you don't make room for others. I don't know your past, but it doesn't really matter. Everyone deserves to belong and learn to accept it. Now, can we become friends already?", she forced her arm forward, the gentle fingers waiting to be shaken. My eyes widened. I saw a smile Mirryia made just for me.

I raced back home. The almighty anxieties felt so light when another was there to bear them with me. The sky was a calm ribbon of blue hues and a neon-orange disc. I searched for a book. An unfinished collection of memories. Unfinished from an absence of the spark that fuelled creativity. The same emotion overwhelms me. I flicked my thumb through the lined pages, beginning to write. An uninterrupted, intimate moment between the paper, pen and me.



*Truly, what is a home sweet home?
I've been wondering since I was born.
A quiet, cozy, warm place?
Or a lively, crowded space?
A sanctuary behind the outside sun?
A site for personal matters to be done?*

*Where I am to mortally dwell?
For familial bonding, as they tell?
No, it holds value, it's full of life.
Took me so long to finally realise.
Freed me from my yoke of shame.
Doesn't mind when you're not the same.
It houses anger, tears and joy.*

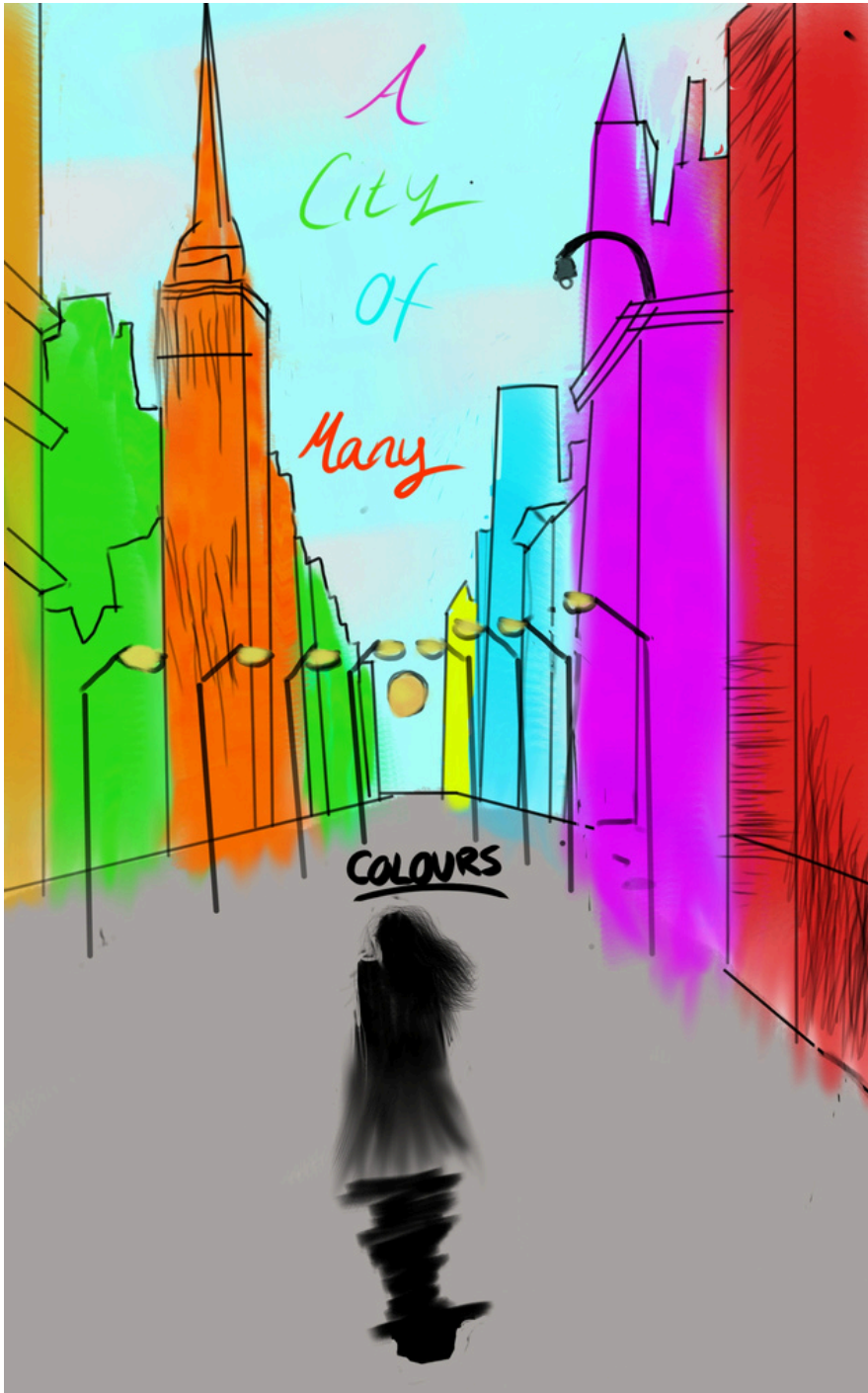
*Watched you since you were a small boy.
More than a house, a hamlet, a town.
It's anywhere that changes your frown.*

*Where you're accepted, where you belong.
Where you embrace a love for so long.
It's a community, a place, a feeling.
The one that you'll be left missing.*

*A lifelong harvest from the same seed.
Truly, a home sweet home is what I need.
I marched into my home,
Cherishing the comfort I yearned for so long.*

A City of Many Colours

By Audrey Sze



“

A lone figure walks through a bright and colourful city. The contrast between the dark silhouette and the vibrant buildings explores themes of identity, loneliness, and belonging. Inspired by Dandenong's diverse community, the artwork suggests that even when someone feels alone, they can find connection and a sense of home through its guiding lights.

”

Chinese for Sale

by Tammy Sze



"Do you speak English?"

A beat of silence passed as unfamiliar words hung in the air. Haoyue wished he could say yes, but all he did was shake his head. "Chinese only."

The cashier nodded thoughtfully.

"If you want to, the exchange rate is—"

Before she could finish, he had slid over a stack of carefully folded cash towards her.

"A word of caution," said the lady in her subtle Australian accent, "once you receive a language, the fluency in your old one will disappear. Do you understand?"

Haoyue nodded again, folding his hands tightly in his lap. He watched her pull out a needle from a case, labeled with one word he had learnt to read from his friend: English. She guided his chin towards her and, with clinical precision, pierced the underside of his tongue. Only a soft click echoed in the room, but suddenly a million voices and letters and sentences and rules began flooding Haoyue's head. Words upon words upon words forming and unforming until they finally connected and silenced.

He opened his eyes and looked into the gaze of the linguistics clerk.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"The same as before," he replied, syllables forming crisply in his mouth.

Haoyue clamped a hand over his mouth. There was not a single trace of an accent in his voice.

The lady laughed.

"Very eloquent indeed."

He stepped out onto the bustling streets of Keysborough, his mind buzzing with a strange, electric clarity. For the first time since his family had immigrated to Australia, the billboards didn't look like a chaotic jumble of shapes. He could read the street signs. He understood the chatter of the teenagers walking past him. He felt lighter, like a spirit who had finally been untethered from flesh.

When he arrived home, the familiar smell of soy sauce and sesame oil greeted him, but as he stepped into the kitchen, a sudden wave of nausea hit him. The scent, which usually made his mouth water, felt overwhelmingly heavy and suffocating.

"Haoyue, is that you?" his mother said in Mandarin, not looking up from the chopping board.

"Did you buy the noodles?"

Haoyue stopped in his tracks and squinted at her as if seeing clearly would help him recognise her words. It felt disorienting to be unable to understand sentences he had known since birth. He opened his mouth to reply, but the words caught in his throat. He knew what he wanted to say, but his tongue refused to shape the familiar tones and instead, crisp, perfect English slipped out.



"I don't understand—"

His mother froze, the nimble knife hovering over the spring onion. She turned to him, her brow furrowed. "What are you saying? Speak properly."

Haoyue could only catch the sound of her words, not the meaning. A familiar cadence surrounded him of sharp pronunciation and smooth tones. It's okay, he told himself, staring at his mother as she continued to dice spring onions and sneak concerned glances at him. This is what I wanted. Now I can get a better job. I can finally be understood. I won't be the outsider anymore.

Haoyue's mother was still muttering when he left, unable to stand the stifling sounds and smells in his house. He found himself walking through the local market district, a vibrant hub that he frequented; a place that brought him peace. Around him, a sea of Mandarin, Cantonese and other dialects washed over the pavement, making the air buzz. Yesterday, it would have been a comfort, but today it felt entirely alien despite the only change being his language. The chatter sounded like static on a radio station he couldn't tune into.

He returned home, but before he could retreat into his room, the family altar caught his eye. Framed portraits of his grandparents stared back at him, and gentle, curling smoke from burning incense dissipated in the breeze of an open window. Usually, the scent of the incense grounded him, connecting him to a long line of history and belonging. Today, the smoke made him cough, stinging his eyes.

Looking into the eyes of his ancestors, a terrifying realisation washed over him. He hadn't just traded away a language; he had traded away himself. He was a stranger to his parents, a stranger to his community, and a stranger to his own ancestors watching him from their perch on a glass shelf. The price of integration was his soul.

Haoyue ran. He sprinted through the Dandenong streets, past the lake where he used to feed the ducks and the roundabout where his mother always told him to stop. His lungs were burning by the time he reached the fading storefront of the language clinic. The lights inside were dimming, and the lady from earlier was just pulling down the front blinds. Haoyue pounded on the glass. "Please! Wait!"

The woman opened the door, surprised. "Young man? Is something wrong with the fluency?" "Take it back," Haoyue gasped, tears welling in his eyes. "Please. I want my old language back."

The clerk sighed softly, looking at him with a mixture of pity and understanding. "I'm sorry, but the return policy is clear. If everybody could just change languages—"

"I don't care," Haoyue said, his voice cracking. "Please, I...I need to talk to my mother. You won't ever see me again after this, I promise."



She paused, key slotted into the clinic door. With a slow nod, she gestured for him to sit in the chair one last time. The needle emerged from the case. A sharp click echoed in the quiet room, and suddenly, the English intonation, grammar and words that had taken root in his head shattered into a million pieces like a porcelain pot.

"Do you speak English?"

A beat of silence passed as unfamiliar words hung in the air like lanterns. When Haoyue finally understood, he shook his head, a peaceful smile on his face.

My Composition

by Lily Hatwell



Surrounded by these masses of people, I have never felt more alone. Never felt more out of tune. The chaotic noises clash against my ears as I step outside – the inconsistent beats of footsteps on the footpath, dissonant wailing of sirens, voices rising and falling in a language I cannot follow. The street pulses with urgency, pushing the tempo forward. I move out of time, a misplaced note in the composition of life. Despite the physical closeness of those around me, I feel as though I am still held at a distance, an invisible barrier preventing my words from being understood. This volume, this chaos – it can't quite find harmony. As I continue along these unfamiliar paths, I imagine the concrete pavements of the city to be the lush grass of another place – quieter roads, crisp air, and a whisper in the trees that is perfectly in tune.

I return to what was given to me a long time before I could comprehend its significance. Music was never something that I chose; I inherited it just as I did my mother's eyes and my father's humour. Both of them being musicians, I grew up in a house enveloped with harmony, Sound waves chasing me down hallways and embracing me as my eyes drifted shut at night. Music became our primary language, a way to communicate feelings we couldn't verbalise – to congratulate us on our successes and comfort us after our losses. I didn't realise during my childhood that this language was not just a hobby, but a way to survive challenge.

As I grew, I spent my time in theatres, in rehearsal rooms, chasing the Sound waves just as they had chased me when I was younger. I played with other students like me, coming together in annual celebrations of our connection. We understood each other through not just our belonging to this place, but belonging to the music reverberating in the theatre – this theatre that embraces the diversity of this community, its clock tower keeping everyone in time, never missing a beat.

While words, dialects and scripts belong to borders, music does not ask for translation. These Sound waves traverse mountains, seas and skies with no need for a map. They are never lost; always home. When I am faced with discomfort, faced with obstacles, I reach for those Waves, those melodies. The music offers me quiet reassurance even when I cannot understand the world around me. It reminds me of home.

As I walk into the rehearsal room, I am brought back to my body, in a new land, far from the sounds of my memories. Instruments murmur as I take my seat at the piano, fingertips hovering above keys that I know so well. As I make contact with the cool ivory, a Sound wave pierces the silence. Suddenly, the room is alive. Emotions pour out through my fingers, translating to Sound waves that bounce off of every corner in the room. They weave through the bodies, interweaving to create one cohesive melody. These Waves, they cross the invisible borders, building a bridge between the souls of everyone in the room. I become an interpreter for my thoughts, translating feeling to vibration, emotion into motion. I do not need my voice to understand the pain of the violinist across from me.



I do not need a shared vocabulary to feel the drummer's excitement. The bridges of the Sound waves, they connect us where language has failed. Here, we do not belong to a border or a nation, we belong to the rhythm, to the heart of the music pulsing around us. We all form this harmony together, as one.

The final chord resonates around the room, gradually fading to silence, yet somehow it lingers – suspended in the room, a ghost of the Waves that just connected us. The air has changed, somehow; a sense of mutual understanding has filled the atmosphere. Even in this silence, this stillness, I can still feel the lasting harmonies that will fill my head long after I leave this room. While this piano before me may be laid out into ordered groups, black and white separated across a keyboard, the listener cannot distinguish each individual note – they only remember the sound of the harmony, of all the keys working together as one. This shift in the atmosphere is reflected within me, too. The foreign nature of the city outside hasn't changed, yet I have begun to understand how to find comfort and exist within it. Music hasn't replaced the country I left behind, but expanded my perception of where I belong and what I consider to be 'home'.

Outside, I am again met with restless noise. Cars rush past. Conversations overlap. Unfamiliar words still drift by. However something has changed. The sounds no longer feel entirely dissonant; I can make out the beginnings of a chord, the skeleton of harmony. As I walk, I notice the rhythm of my steps beginning to fall into time with the pulse of this new concrete street. Music has taught me how to step forward, to take on a challenge as opposed to retreating to what is comfortable. The sound that I created moments ago still lingers around me, paving a route through the uncertainty that lies ahead. Each note guides me toward a sense of belonging in a place that once felt entirely unreachable. This state of being an outsider – it starts to weigh me down less. Because no matter where I go, no matter the song of a new city, there will always be an invisible string of sound that connects me to the theatre, to music. To home.

On the Kaleidoscope of Youth

by Lincoln Ge



"We are such stuff as dreams are made on"

William Shakespeare

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"

John Keats

I have never crossed the Amazon; I have never sailed the seas. I have never trekked across the Gobi nor climbed the highest peaks.

But I have walked the Harmony Square more times than I can count on those grey and rust coloured steps, amongst the shade of evergreen trees, beneath the Australian flag that sits upon the clocktower. Oh, its gravitas, an old sentinel of brick and brass, the keeper of the Drum Theatre that chimes like a heartbeat, a constant that pulses through wood and stone.

And so, I carve these words in steel because I have seen that tricolour flag fly far, felt its shadow fall thick throughout the forecourt's pavement. In rain and wind and heat and hail, the traffic light flag, as I affectionately knew it would flail and flutter, like a butterfly caught in a hurricane. Yet after all is said and done, after its battle was fought and won, its fabric would remain unscathed.

And in watching that flag endure all of this, I am reminded that the council is but a microcosm for the country it represents. A country of many colours, just as Dorothea Mackellar claimed a hundred years ago: "I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains".

And if this city is a country in miniature, then I have learnt the red, green and yellow not just from flags, or the colours of the bin, but in nature too.

And nowhere have I learnt the names of those colours more vividly, more vibrantly than the small park beside my house, the one that turns to fire in autumn. Every year, by late April, the trees announce their surrender. First green, then yellow, then red, letting go of their leaves as though each colour was its own delicate jewel. Slowly, over the course of the month, the leaves would form their own wonderful mosaic on the ground. The light that once tiptoed and twinkled through the gaps like nature's gemstones would become honey-coloured beams bathing the grass in all its quiet warmth and iridescent glory. It would ignite a fiery hue in the evening sky, as I would look up in awe to watch the clouds loft around like slow-moving embers, amongst the golden haze that draped itself over the ground.



After all, fire is the test of gold, and many children, like me, played in that park in their youth. Not yet subjected to trials and tribulations, still trembling little children of touch and tease. But, although we were young, our hands too small, our minds too innocent, we possessed a curiosity that only youth could bring.

A quiet, defiant persistence that the world was in our control, carrying the greens, reds and yellows of grass, flowers and leaves in our pockets.

You can still see it, in the way that small children laugh until their voice gives out, yell until their lungs burn, and run until their shadows stretch long across the grass. After all, the joy of a child is the closest thing we have to unbroken light - fierce, bright and impossibly pure. Childhood is like autumn. Beautiful, a universal experience, but fleeting. The tiny toddler who once chased butterflies until the sun set, who would watch the light shine through their wings like a magical illumination, who once screamed and cried and tried to run away from their own shadow would realise that they were never a threat, only a promise, an oath that one day they would stand tall enough to cast it.

Whilst those memories might fade, the colours do not. The same tripartite, green, yellow and red still endure on. They no longer just inhabit the boundaries of the park, but they clothe the city at times of the year. In early February, the city blushes crimson, lanterns blooming, banners unfolding for Lunar New Year. Later in the year, the city glows yellow for Diwali, where strings of warm light, reminiscent of those threads that we all played in as children drape the storefronts. And when December arrives, the city dresses itself in green, the colour of life and renewal, a scintillating display of wreaths and pine trees.

These colours, once confined to the park of my childhood, now ripple across the city with grandeur. And yet, the palette endures. This city has always been a land of heroes, the quieter kind.

Whilst I have never crossed the Amazon, others have. Whilst I have never sailed the seas, others will. Whilst I will never cross the Gobi, others can. Whilst I can't ever climb the highest peaks, others have, and they have carried the same colours they saw as children with them.

My journey in this city was peaceful, but for others it was anything but. They crossed jungles, oceans, deserts and mountains, not for glory, not for adventure, but for the hope that their children might one day run in the same meadow as I did. In the faith that they too would experience the purest theatre of wonder, for it is only the mind of a child that believes the world bends for them, chasing each fallen leaf like priceless treasure, savouring in the sunlight like it was nectar and ambrosia.

These are the aspirations of the heroes rarely spoken about. Who silently stitch their colours, hammered out of hardship into a flag so that their children can inherit a life painted with potential. This Harmony Square, this council, this city of many colours, is not merely a home, it is a testament to every journey made in the name of hope. Colour is the memory the world leaves on us, and it is the inheritance we leave behind.

The Writer's World

By Zoe Casequin



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A young writer is discovering literary realms through books, surrounded by Greater Dandenong Library cards; acting as keys to endless possibilities to learn, imagine and create through the stories, ideas and adventures they find.

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The Mačka's of 3175

by Alice Huijbregts



My childhood wasn't in Dandenong, postcode 3175, nor do I speak Serbian but Mačka sounds like munchkin in English. It can mean both cat and a familiar face, like a friend or a neighbour you adore.

I moved out from a suburb called Belgrave Heights, my parents now being 15 minutes away, postcode 3160, on the 24th of September: key day.

My first taste of Dandenong was meeting a man who lived in unit 11, parked beside me. 'European girl?!' He wound down his car-window. 'Where are you from?'

I felt curious, puzzled and anew because I actually haven't thought about it? Looking the way that I do, it hasn't come up before in such a casual way.

'Australian.' I hugged my kettle. 'But my dad's Dutch, from Holland?'
'Netherlands.' He blinked and nodded. 'I, Indonesian.'

A lady on the other side of the fence watched down from her balcony, a mug in hand. I waved, she waved. I was moving into a home connected to other realms, I could hear bowls clank, vacuuming, babies-cry and belly-laughter. I felt a cuddle in my chest, I could use a tap that was my own, even though it was coming off its socket, exposing the metal-rope-part that's meant to be completely hidden and a coffee splattered power-plug to make a cup of tea. I had a place of my own.

I unpacked the box I had made three months ago for my first day: Yorkshire tea ©, my Misses-Claws-Christmas-mug, oat milk and now the biscuits I just got from the real-estate team reading: 'Congratulations on your new home, Alice!'

I soaked in the previous smell of someone else's life. No furniture, worn out carpet, walls that were once flatline-white but now aged to become tea-bag-gold. I wanted to imagine my smell, the scent I give when I hug someone as the aroma everywhere in this place. I imagined dad with me painting the walls tomorrow. The carpet will be ripped away bare. Underneath I might find chalk numbers, measurements and arrows from the 1989 builders.

I let my kettle fizzle and went scavenger hunting. Looking through every window, using my phone-compass-app to gauge where the sun would set. Picturing where my monstera would go and where my pots of cacti will toast as the east facing window is due to be scorching by Christmas.

There was no smell of rain, but there were rain-clouds. In my childhood, there were kookaburra's warning the downpour with their cackles echoing throughout the hums of the 3160 valleys.



The earth all around you even pouted like it was going to cry. Not in a human expression, but the ants below cramp back into their underground suburbs and this reminds the trees to reach up to quench their thirst.

The sky's warning call for 3175 is grumbles and stone-cracks, blushing the pathways an oyster-shell-purple. My apartment went darker.

I people watched, a fresh cup of brew and biscuits to dunk.

A girl passed by and the wind unwrapped her hijab, she adjusted her scarf. I peered through the curtains, feeling the grime on my fingertips. The scent of mossy-concrete through my flyscreen.

'Did you want an umbrella?!'

She followed the sound of my voice, back to me, my lounge-room window.

'I love the rain!' She raised her arms in a hallelujah stretch. 'It is good for me!'

I eventually met the lady over on the balcony when her son Jessy visited. My kitchen window looks out onto their love-heart-shaped-rails and cottage looking roof. Jessy translated her Bosnian.

'Mum has been wanting to tell you: keep your blinds shut, we all can see into your apartment. To stay careful as she thinks you are new here. Also too, you parked crooked. Cute cat in the window by the way.'

I turn to my Lynx, a grey-tiger with splats of orange, squinting down at us like she's in a deep meditation.

'My munchkin!'

'You're Serbian then? Your Mačka?'

'No, munchkin, like my little cutie.'

Jessy walked down the stairs and was tall enough to peek over the wood panels nailed in a row, not pushing too hard because our fence has the strength of a baby-tooth ready to be yanked.

'You need help moving in? Let us know, what about sugar, or basil?'

I enjoyed boasting that I was going to use a can of soup I pre-packed in a box, but there is no gas. The water and electricity still worked. Jessy had good stories that apparently you see high-vis people come every now and then to shut off power mains.

'A lot of people rent. Always new people. Mums' and me 've been here for years. We run the place.'



After the introduction, Jessy stepped off the garden-bed on the other side and went back up the steps, a delicate Capuchino-grey with bluestones like dusted coco. The lady, named Anne, said something passionately.

'Mum says you can have cake sometime soon,' Jessy dubbed. 'She likes you already, just not right now because today's a red day on the Orthodox Calander, a day to rest.'

Jessy visits when he can but is at the age when people marry and start their own numbers. His being 3128, Lake Park, and his car-number-plate reads '9 Giant ducks' with a little bit of creativity when I read: '9GD U7K.'

I learnt quickly that he was doing exactly what I do now, knowing everybody his whole childhood in 3175. Lending a hand with computer glitches, asking if anyone needed bread or milk when heading to the shops. You only have to walk by someone's window and a cat will be there, a mačka, wishing you well on your travels.

Away From Sea and Washed To Shore

by Stephanie Galanos 



It was midday and yet Quinn felt like she was dragged out of bed with no time to brace spending the next hour in a room with a stuffy, sweaty odour that opened windows and blazing fans could not shoo away. Unable to stand the strain in her neck, she tentatively lifted her head, gazing towards the large circular table where other children sat, digging through whatever craft supplies that piled in the middle.

Among the babbling of murmurs, clicking, and tapping, Quinn saw books upon books that seem to continue through the second floor. An endless sea that Quinn could get lost in. She squirmed at the idea. She thought things were much simpler at home where she can easily navigate this or that. But since she moved away, it was as though the tough steady ground she relied upon for years just suddenly turned into water.

Quinn remembered when she was a toddler, clinging onto her dad's leg, shrieking over how violent crashing waves were at the beach. That's how she felt now.

Quinn looked back to the cutting and pasting, folding and unfolding at the table. At her old home's school library, she'd chortle with her friends, pick up manga or picture books and swoon over how hot this character was or snort over how distorted the drawings looked. But now, she felt restrained to the chair, barely lifting a finger to pick up even one sheet of paper.

After moving to Springvale, Quinn spent her time indoors, shutting herself in her new room with new white walls where not an imperfectly perfect crack of paint was in sight. She wanted to disassociate from everything but couldn't escape yearning for even her old room's chipped paint.

Quinn knew how warmer her bed felt, how much more food was on her plate, how more spacious her house was in Springvale, but she couldn't shake away the hollowness in her heart.

Suddenly, she snapped back to her surroundings when she heard a young voice ask, "Are you okay?"

She turned to the sound, meeting another young girl.

Quinn flushed, "Yeah... I'm just new here."

"Oh okay." The girl giggled and introduced herself as Shu.



Shu revealed she came out of choice and laughed about how the air conditioning was much worse at home. Quinn told her how different Springvale was to her old suburb from the way restaurants looked, the cafes, to even the streets.

She reminisced over the beach that was not too far from her old house. She longed to stand on the shore until her legs ached, lulled by the sea where waves would crash and fold into each other. Any tenseness Quinn felt in her body washed away at the sight. It came to a point where not even a shout can snap her out of such a state.

"That sounds wonderful! I've never been to the beach before- okay, once, but that was years ago." Shu beamed.

"Yeah," Quinn sighed, feeling the tenseness in her neck come again, which slowly spread throughout her body. Her lips contorted to a frown.

Before Shu could yap on, she noticed how slumped Quinn looked in her chair.

"I know what that's like," Shu said. "Y'know, moving."

Shu revealed she was only nine when her family decided to move away from China for greater opportunity. She couldn't complain, knowing her parents wanted what's best. But it also meant saying goodbye to the gentle elderly woman who secretly gave Shu sweets, the children she'd laugh and run around with after school, and even the rickety cobbled stairs that lead to her home.

When Shu felt the same aching as Quinn, she'd sometimes visit the local noodle bar, indulging herself in the silky warm broth, the bouncy texture of noodles, or chew into the braised meat toppings until her stomach could no longer hold any food.

Despite living in Australia for a few years, those dishes eased Shu's longing for China, bringing back memories of food vendors her family would frequent when she was a toddler.

Quinn listened eagerly and surprisingly, felt her stomach rumble at the thought of food she never had before. For the first time, Quinn saw how spacious the library was. And with every glance, she saw shelves of books, people reading, some chatting away with friends, or people intensely scratching away at their notebooks.

Quinn wanted to roam around, climb the staircases and browse each shelf the library has to offer. She wanted to swim deeper beyond the shore and explore cultures completely foreign to her.

Quinn's pocket rang and she reached for the phone, seeing her mum's name on screen. Her brows furrowed, knowing clearly well what it meant. But she didn't want to leave the circular table or her new friend.



Quinn excused herself from the table and picked up.

"Hey Mum? Is it okay if I stay a tad bit longer?" Quinn chewed on the inside of her cheek until her mum sighed a "yes."

Quinn felt her shoulders soften and gave a meek smile, exchanging her name as the girl looked kind enough. It felt like ages since she talked to another kid as her recent company was just the plaster that remained placid on the walls when she'd crack a joke.

She hung up, feeling the ground beneath her become tough and steady. And suddenly, she realised how relaxed her shoulders and neck were. She felt herself dry from sweat as the room no longer smelled stuffy.

Quinn studied the walls around her. Plaster that no longer resembled the dry and cracked chambers that encased her.

She eyed back to the circular table where her sight crossed Shu's. She grinned and strode back to her seat, cutting through the sea that once held her fixed.

A Short Story of a Long Journey

by Phu Dao



"I can go anywhere I want. Just not home."

The song played in my head as the plane touched down on Australian soil, shredding layers of my skin showing a fear underneath. Fear of being lost with a bittersweet of freedom. I have left everything I know behind to become an international student, left the country I used to call home, the people I call family, the culture that shaped my identity.

Barnacle goose chicks jump out of their nest just 24 hours after they were born, nests which build on high jagged cliffs up to 120 meters to avoid predators. I feel the same way when I first came to Australia, a dive into the air felt like flying until I hit rock bottom. I was doing great at first, meeting new people, starting a new job, and being a teenager. I was loving it, everything was a thrill.

Then tuberculosis.

A lightning strike marked my lung, but instead of disappearing it tore open the sky. I cough out not just blood but pieces of myself, physically and metaphorically. Historically, tuberculosis is the deadliest infectious disease, claiming an estimated 1 billion lives over the last two centuries - a quick research on google stated that as I first learned about the disease when I first knew I had it.

So as one does, I panic!

At this point of the story, I thought of leaving out part of my identity, because I've been avoiding that for a long time now, but my desire is so important and relevant that it will be injustice to this story if I don't include it here. So here is the truth lay bare, I am in fact a queer person.

My whole life I always feel a bit different, and I was scared of being misunderstood, being an outcast, getting avoided. So even though tuberculosis won't be infectious, I can't give it to other people after just one day on medication. I can feel people who know about it treat me differently, and it just hit me harder because of that. I just want to be accepted. One of my favorite authors wrote that depression is not the side effect of cancer, it's the effect of dying. My version is this: "Anxiety is not a side effect of Tuberculosis, it's the effect of stigma".

I was ashamed of my disease. Even when it can't harm others. But, something unexpected helped me on my journey.



As I enter Springvale library owned by the City of Greater Dandenong, I feel welcomed and accepted. The library allows me to converse with the greatest minds of all time - dead or alive - there are thousands of books about Tuberculosis, Queer and whatever topic that you can think of.

I feel seen, and it makes me understand that there are places for minorities here. We have always been here, and we will always be here. Tuberculosis doesn't erase my identity; it emphasises it, making me learn to accept all parts of me, in health or sickness.

Oh that, therapy and room decoration.

It's weird to think how if $1 + 1 = 2$, and $2 + 2 = 4$ then Library + therapy + room decoration = home. That's what I think of Australia now, my second home. A place where I can be understood, learn about other cultures, struggles, where my town has dialogue with the nature surrounding it and my room has a sense of calm for me to escape the chaotic atmosphere.

Am thankful for all of it, the bad and the good.

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