

National Water Week Award Winners

River Yarns Competition WINNER – Open Category, SHORT STORY “Reverence”

by Amanda Sibio—Mooroopna

I knew this girl once. Met her in the city, in a dive of a bar where the drinks were cheap. She was a student, so she couldn't afford much else. Me, I was just cheap. She wasn't from the city. You could tell that right away. It wasn't her clothes or her style; she was doing the whole city grunge thing and doing it well. She had this shine about her, all pink cheeked and a healthy glow that the rest of us seemed to be lacking. I felt a bit grey beside her, inside and out, but the great thing about her was that she had this way of letting some of that shine rub right off on you. We got talking and one thing led to another. You know the drill. Boy meets girl....I don't really need to spell it out, do I?

We used to sit up late at night, just talking. We'd sit out on this beaten old couch on her front verandah and watch the people walking by. She lived in Fitzroy then, and there was plenty to watch, all sorts of stories being played out right there on the footpath. Human dramas of the lowest sort, there in the city. There's nothing better than free entertainment. As I said, that's all we could afford. She used to talk a lot about the things she had done when she was growing up. She could tell a story, make you laugh and feel like you were right there watching it all happen. Took me away from the grime and the poverty, just for awhile, and the next day the city looked just that little bit brighter and I could stomach it for another day. She came from a little town along the Goulburn River, pretty and tidy and everybody-knows-your business sort of place. I can't remember the name of it now, much as I rack my brains. Somewhere near Shepparton I think. I never went there. Wasn't the sort you take home to meet the parents.

The river is like mother's milk to me, I can remember her saying to me once. It sustained her, she said. One of the first stories she ever told me was in that bar on the first night. Who knows how it came up, but you know those random conversations you have with someone you've just met and really like? How they jump across time and space, and how much you want to cram in to try to give that person a little bit of who you are so they might just walk away and want to see you again? It wasn't long before the river made my acquaintance, she told me. As if it was a living, breathing thing. Right across from her house was this gate and dirt track that led down to a swimming spot. Her family would troop down there in summer as soon as the kids were old enough, and they would spend afternoons and evenings covered in Aerogard and slathered in sunscreen. When you grew up near the river, apparently the first thing you learnt about was snakes. It's funny; I don't think I've ever seen one in my life except for in the zoo. Inner city Melbourne isn't exactly teeming with them. Not the reptile sort, anyway, although I knew plenty of cold-blooded sorts.

She was saying how her brother was out on this old log, and the rest of them sitting on the bank. All happy families like, a bit different to the scenes of my childhood but that's another story. I know you're getting the idea that I'm a bit bitter and cynical. You'd be right. Why do you think I liked her so much? She was everything I wasn't. Anyway, her Dad suddenly jumps up and starts yelling out "Snake! Snake!" and pointing to the water just near her brother. He looks wildly around, jumps off the log and starts swimming towards the shore like a dynamo. They were all pretty good swimmers, but he would have broken records with this swim. Arms flailing, legs churning up the water. It sounded like he didn't even turn his head for breath. The rest of them are standing up, fingers curled up into fists and breath held with the tension, but their eyes were never really on the water. They couldn't take their gaze off her brother. It's one of those moments in time that seems to slow right down, and every little detail seems fresh in your mind even after years. The way the water bursts through the air as he punches each hand down stroke after stroke, and the speed of his feet kicking almost inhuman. He finally reaches the bank after what seems like an age, stumbles up gasping for breath. He collapses on the sand and they all look towards him with awe and then turn in disbelief as the voice of her father rings out beside them as he squints in the dimming early evening light towards the spot where her brother had been. "Oh, nah" he drawls in that country farmer type of way, all laconically and such. "It's just a stick." God it made me laugh. A few drinks will do that, and also the fact that it made her laugh. I would do anything to see her laugh, the way her face lit up and her eyes crinkled at the corners.

Another time she told me that she'd dug turtle's eggs out of the sand. She left them there, covered them over with sand. Most of the kids I went to school with would have smashed them up, just for the sake of being destructive. I think the river taught her that, to respect things. She said she used to lie in the water and float on the gentle current, watching the tiny darting kingfishers flitting in and out of their holes in the mud banks. I imagine those flashing feathers, and the cool brown waters dappled with bright sunlight through the gums. The Greek for Kingfisher is Halcyon, did you know that? She told me that if you stayed long enough, that just as twilight was coming the cockatoos would return from whichever new-seeded paddock they had been desiccating and flock to the trees beside the river banks. Their screeching felt like it would shatter the sunset into a thousand crimson shards, until eventually the trees were covered in white and only the occasional call would go out to a comrade across the river to be answered in the rapidly dimming dusk.

I think that was a magic time for her, the way she spoke about it with such reverence. She wasn't religious, but I think in a way that was her church. God is in the details, so they tell me, and it was then in that silent moment just before dark that everything stood out in relief like an oil painting. The pinks of the sunset on the ghost gums, the lilac purple of the eucalypt leaves as the sun faded. The sound of insects and the smell of the bush, those were her halcyon days. She had a million stories like that, and they wrapped around her and made who she was. And then she left. It didn't happen suddenly, but slowly she was gone. She faded away like a sepia-photo of someone's Grandmother left too long in the drawer. And there I was by myself again, grey and worn out without her like a white t-shirt that's never been washed properly.

I've been sitting at bars for the past few years, telling her stories as if they were my own. I don't know where she is. I think she's back at the river by now, at least I hope that's what happened. I couldn't bear to think the city sucked her down. In my mind, she's sitting on some verandah step in the sun looking across at a line of trees that shows you the river isn't far away. She's got a couple of kids and a husband who loves her. It's a simple life, but I think that's the best sort, don't you? I don't know how she drifted away from me. I guess we were too different. She was never going to last long away from that river. I think it called to her, and you can't withstand a siren-call like that for long. And I was never going to leave the city, not really. It all seemed too nice for me. Maybe some screwed up part of me thought I didn't deserve it, didn't deserve her, or maybe the city is as much a part of me as that river was to her. There's something missing, though, since she's been gone. So I've been sitting at some dive of a bar pretending it's me that grew up down there on the banks of that river, watching the leaves swirling in its depths and always the scent of eucalyptus and the sound of cockatoos screeching in the background. It's been a sad sort of existence for awhile, really.

Then not long ago, I found a river down near Heidelberg. It's like a secret river, somehow, despite the people. I know it's the same river as the Yarra up near Southbank, but it's nothing like that dirty, stinking sewer. This is a proper river, as much like the Goulburn as I imagine a river in the city could be. I was walking along a dirt path right alongside the water, where the bank was high to one side and tree branches overhung the path, letting in dim light and the muted sound of birdsong. And there in a little cavity hollowed out of the bank someone had made a little grotto. There was a statue of the Mother Mary, and offerings of flowers and other things. It was a revelation to me. There were people in this place who held this river sacred, who came here to pray and to cry, to confess their sins and offer up their thanks. That all these rivers joined in the end, on their inexorable way to the ocean. This river and her river are one and the same, when it all comes down to it.

Walking down here now, it seems to be changing me somehow. I put my feet in the other day, felt like it was cleaning away some of the cynic. Maybe if I go full under one of these hot summer afternoons it will be like a baptism. I'll be washed clean and I can start again with the Mother Mary as my witness. You know, I've always known why she had to return there, but now I really understand it. Everyone has a place, somewhere we truly belong. So she went back. Now maybe it's time for me to start moving forward.

RUNNER UP – Open Category, SHORT STORY

“From the High Country to the Plains; with love?”

by Kammy Cordner Hunt—Mansfield

The miner's cottage lay in a sub-alpine field, perched just above the bank of a mountain stream. Martin commuted to work in Mansfield, and I ran a small equestrian business there. It was quite a dreamlike existence, really. The Baltic-pine-lined bedroom looked over Home Station Creek which bubbled cheerily below the cottage all year round. The only time it had ever stopped running in living memory was during the drought of '83, becoming a chain of small pools winding between the plunging spurs and little flats of its upper reaches. The babbling of the brook was the background to our idyllic life in the long-abandoned abode of Shank's Lane.

We put up an electric fence to create a small holding paddock, which we ran along the natural terracing beside the creek. This kept the working horses near at hand, otherwise they were free to roam in 100 hilly acres which could be most inconvenient. On the 3rd October, 1993, at the end of a busy and fruitful weekend of horsing around, we put the steeds in their enclosure and fed them, withdrawing indoors from the unusually persistent rain which had challenged our activities all weekend.

We listened to it hammering on the tin roof close above, expecting a relentment soon. Our friendly stream was becoming a gushing torrent, making a crescendo of new sounds as the water funnelled its way down the narrow channel.

Later we went to bed and the rain was unabated. How snug and familiar it was to lie there listening to the chatter from the brook and the clatter from the rain – except the chatter had become rather agitated on this occasion. But as always it lulled us into a baby's sleep, like being in a womb with life's blood rushing all around.

At one in the morning I awoke suddenly and inexplicably, sitting bolt upright in bed, senses keening. Something was wrong; different. There was an eeriness that made my hackles stand up. Why was it so quiet?

Ah! The rain had stopped. But that did not explain the eery creeping of my skin from the torpid, heavy stillness. Something else was not right, and I had to acknowledge that a thick sense of forboding was hanging in the room; a surging feeling of dread I could not explain. With Martin sleeping unconcerned, I felt investigation was called for. I was heavily pregnant with our first child, and feeling vulnerable; but also felt committed to eliminating the possibility of immediate danger.

Senses hyper-attuned, I followed the indistinct trail of dread, suspended in the air, out of the bedroom and into the hall. I looked at the battered, perforated original door of the cottage... it hummed with some strange vibration, a veiled threat, pressed by some ominous presence outside. I opened the door.

The sound hit me, but it was barely a sound. A thick, oily, slick sound, like the belly of a snake passing over grass, but bigger; all-enveloping. Straining eyes registered the alien

scene before me, the dim light reflecting a strange world with sky above and below. Our lawn sloping down to the little ravine had disappeared under a new entity, stretched out before me - flat, slimy black, like a mirror, its surface roping and writhing, advancing up the lawn, pressing and crushing, swirling with debris, silent but for this sliding sound, and massively menacing.

In serious alarm, I ran and dragged Martin from his cocoon – always a hopeless task – shaking and shouting until he registered the urgency.

“The horses! We have to let them out of the yard! They’ll drown there, imprisoned in the flood - tangled in electric wires!”

The rain by now had returned with growing ferocity as, squishing through sponge-like earth, we raced out to the enclosure. I passed the electric pulse unit and had the presence of mind to switch it off, wondering what happens to electric fences in floods.

On their terracing, the horses were still on dry ground, roosting calmly in the storm with their backs to the driving rain, mildly alarmed by our unfamiliar intrusion in the night. Our panic caused their flight responses to switch on, and they responded with borderline hysteria to our rescue attempt, but we got them out the awkward gate, and they took off up the hills to join their mob.

For us, there was to be no more sleeping. There was no escape into town, which was downstream all the way. There were always our own hills above us for sanctuary, but we couldn’t quite leave until we knew if we should be taking things with us.

So we stood on the verandah in the vague light and watched the water swirling around trees and fence posts, and observed shapes sailing past. We tried to envisage what now lay beneath that surly mass of laden liquid.

The rain calmed again, and then stopped altogether before morning. The peak we witnessed was not surpassed, and the flow began to recede. We allowed ourselves to return to bed and sleep off the excitement.

Of course, at the top of the catchment, the flow of a watercourse responds instantly to the precipitation, with only a minor delay between the two events. By the time we got up in daylight, the stream was back between its banks, roaring in outrage at its lost liberty. The vegetation lay trampled and forlorn, a testament to the weight that had steam-rolled it; and the vale was strewn botanical souvenirs from upstream.

We celebrated our fortunate escape from disaster, and swapped stories with neighbours. The Mansfield area returned quickly, gratefully, to normal, the flash floods around the district just a freaky experience for most of us, worthy of excitement and gesticulation.

And then we heard the news. The bulge in the hose was moving down the line. Floodwaters were advancing upon towns downstream.

The sun was out, the ground was drying up, the high water was past... but not for those below us, who now had to sit and wait helplessly to see what would befall them. Here in the hills, we could smugly sit and watch as the water we collected and sent on moved out of our lives... but it was inexorably moving on into theirs. Our little flash flood had flowed down and joined with others from many small streams, like an army taking soldiers from feudal villages, gathering in might with swelling numbers, advancing upon its destination with the troops falling in behind.

Thus the waters advanced upon Benalla, our comrade city downstream. Imagine sitting there helplessly, hearing they were coming, knowing it, unable to deflect it, awaiting the unavoidable outcome.

I had experienced the water's enormous, intractable power in a tiny microcosm. Imagine it when it has all the might of its assembled brother-floods.

Benalla was inundated soon after – a definitive, life-altering event for the town and all its inhabitants. It seemed so unfair that in kindred Mansfield we should get off scot-free, and they should be so profoundly, irreversibly affected.

Fifteen years on, Benalla has recovered and triumphed, and the floods look awfully like never being an issue again, for other reasons. Wide-eyed children will listen in disbelief to how water was once so plentiful it could be a curse.

Even so, I can't help feeling the occasional flood was probably easier to recover from than this future we may be facing of universal water deprivation.

HIGHLY COMMENDED – Open Category, SHORT STORY

“Carried Away”

by Carly Wearne- Kinglake

I like the word river. I like the word journey. I like the words magic, dreaming, reflection.

As a child, I loved the words “I can change the world”.

These words were rushed into my head, pushed by the waters of the rivers and creeks of my youth. My young girlhood was spent muddy and hot, with feet toughened by sliding on rocks, boulders, and fallen sodden tree logs. I was master of the universe back then. I could shape rivers. The strong and deep watery gush of murkiness was all in my control.

With the help of like minded brothers, friends, cousins, every free weekend at our home creek, Diamond Creek, Eltham, or summer holiday at Porepunkah in the Buckland and Ovens Rivers, or Easter break at the King River, Melbourne Cup long weekend at Cumberland River, we changed our worlds.

In waterways of all kinds we built rapids for airbed and tube races. Carried boulders twice our size and dramatically hurled and splashed them into place, channeling the flow, increasing the speed and danger of the planned adventures on our floatation devices. Limbs were almost always gashed or broken, and near drownings were expected.

We created waterfalls. They were always a mighty feat to watch when we had finished molding and harnessing the power of the water. I loved putting a carefully selected gum leaf ever so gently into the waterfalls path and then see it get trashed and overcome as it was sucked helplessly into the crash of the fall. By shifting rocks we changed our waterfall and it could be sat in and under. We were showered and massaged by the thump of the water.

We created aboriginal places. We honored our knowledge of the local river people as best we could. River rocks were ground into different and brightly coloured paints. These rich reds, yellows, and dusty greys were slathered onto our faces and bodies. The colours felt warm, we felt incredibly brave and strong and safe in our paint. We painted on bark, surrounding our riverbed studio with art. Flat, smooth rocks were the best canvas. Our backs and necks always hot from searching in the sun for the perfect river rock.

Innocent childhood river play soon turned a bend. The river hood of youthful and carefree adventures changed without me knowing. The dry riverbank, suddenly, became more appealing. Once the bank was a place to chuck stuff on, whilst heading out to the water where the real action was, now it became a haven of observation. To sit and watch the river became my focus. To sit and watch the boys raging against the river water. The skinny suntanned backs and wooly heads of my childhood boy mates started to compete with the river for my attention. “River” versus “Any boy with sparkly eyes and scruffy hair”. The boys won.

I also began to feel the cold of the water. I could no longer get wet! The once glorious squish underfoot, now produced girly squeals from me, and sent me rushing for the grass and a towel in the sunshine. I needed to warm up after merely toe dipping the icy water and mud.

My relationship with the rivers was changing. I couldn't control the high pitched ‘eeeeek’ that exploded from me at the rivers merest touch. Not everything is controllable, I began to discover.

Upon reflection, the river helped me to grow up believing in my own strength. Little did I know then, but I would need that strength. The rivers of the future were to float many more

adventures my way. My love for the river was being tested. Thankfully, the river tossed up a surprise for me. To sit and watch and breathe the river at night was a new discovered love. As a young child I had slept through, unaware of the magical forces of a night river. The river too eerie and dark and mysterious for a child. But for a teenager, the riverside at night was the place to be. Some sweet wine and awful cigarettes added to the rivers dangerous charm. Boys so confident by day, throwing their bodies at the river, became unnervingly quiet by night. I wanted to definitely skinny dip with a gorgeous boy at night, the water seductive and velvety. The river and friends always hinted at the fun and warmth of swimming naked with a loved boy at night, after some wine, and in the hot of summer. My first attempt at braving the depths of the night river, holding onto a boy's strong moon and water glistened arms, ended quickly. In fear and not readiness, I bolted to the safety of my distant family campsite. I lay spinning and wet in a tent, wondering if I would survive the embarrassment of not being ready for swimming in a night river with a silent, naked, eager to wrestle with me, boy.

Too quickly, and with some heartbreak, I negotiated the new twists in the river and nighttime escapades by the river, or not, were no longer fearful.

With knowledge gained from my local watering holes, I felt ready to tackle greater waterways. I had outgrown this river system and wanted more. The Northern Territory beckoned. Now I would learn. The massiveness of the rivers up there. The waterfalls astounded me, my childish imaginings weren't even close. Waterholes dragged me into their unimaginable depths. The feeling was overpowering and irresistible. It was hot and the water was a refuge. Swimming in the gorges helped the recently buried child within escape and dive and play platypus again.

The locals seemed to sit by their rivers for lots of the time, watching. I wanted to join their gang of watching. I could have watched those rivers forever. It seemed right that they were appreciating these waterways. The water provided life in the midst of vast heat and dry. I also began to think the locals were so absorbed by the rivers because they may have been spending last precious, magical moments with them. It struck me that although the walls of the gorges were impressive because of their size, they were also showing a lack of water, emptiness. Perhaps the gorges were once filled to the top with flowing water and life. The country is drying out.

My life's river turned another bend, sharply. I wanted to save our world, protect our environment and care for people. I wanted to connect everyone with a river. I reckoned we could learn from the locals I'd seen Up North and we all needed to watch, look, hear, breathe, rest, and care more. I decided to work with people as a social worker. Challenging rapids to take on, often met with criticism, "You'll learn" "Still so naïve" "Get a real job", but once in the fast flow, no way of stopping the ride.

For years I worked with so many lost spirits, who I believed needed a map to find their lost waterways. Saddest of all, however, some people had no rivers to reunite with. No memories of home made waterfalls, no knowledge of the art of slime rock walking, no safe place to return to.

Dams were now built in my rivers. Built without my consent or cooperation. Ugly walls that interrupted the flow of fairness and humanity.

Hope, I learnt, however, can always be retained. The river is surprising in its strength and

there will always be a trickle breaking through any dam wall.

My childhood gushing waters have trickled to a resilient stream, much like the part of the No. 1 Creek in Kinglake that I live alongside today. Clean fresh water flows freely into my path of the creek. But so sadly the water gets tangled in years and years worth of untouched by children logs and bark, bracken, blackberries.

Today, I play in the bushland alongside the creek with my husband, a cheeky bloke with a twinkle in his eye, who flowed my way. Like the boys from seemingly so long ago, he pulls at the logs fallen over the creek. He shifts boulders and stirs up the water. He reckons we'll find waterfalls under the bush debris. Our creek will rush freely and be able to carry a thong to the ocean once again.

Our three small boys have been introduced to rivers, creeks, mountain springs, lakes, puddles, mud, fishing, leeches, frogs, snakes and lost thongs. They are just beginning their adventures. The boys are growing quickly. I am beginning to relax about the endless supervision required when introducing highly spirited little boys to abovementioned excitements. In recent discussions, with obviously neglectful parents, I asked "Where were you when we broke arms or nearly bled to death?", in return I was offered "It was different back then". I, however, feel compelled to watch my children, unable to find the time to make any real cracks in the big dam wall of life beyond my backyard, especially knowing that each step my boys take could possibly require stitches, stingose or sunscreen. Rivers will flow more freely again, soon. When I am no longer as needed for 'kisses better' when scratched, for sandwiches for when "I'm hungry" is complained about over and over and over. The pull and push of the river water will win. The call to attack the dam wall is beginning to rush more strongly through my thoughts again. P11 return to changing the world, paddling in waters, protecting people and places, as long the job is three days a week and I'll need school holidays off.

A spring also originates on our land. A small burst of clear, fresh water pops up from the earth, and makes its way to join the No. 1 Creek, which flows along our boundary. These days, I chant "NO DAMS!" "NO DAMS!" to my bloke when talk begins about 'redirecting' our spring. "It could be used to start a bottled drinking water business.., storage of water for bushfire fighting... it's a pool, not a dam", he claims, frustrated. I still feel responsible for protecting our water. Instead of chaining myself to bulldozers in the rainforests, as I would have done, I now jump in front of my bloke when he starts his chainsaw. The trickle will magically flow on, with a little help from me. New dreams and adventures await around the bend.

WINNER – Open Category, POEM

“My Childhood Days”

by Dianne Goschnic – Alexandra

For hours and days we played each week
Along the banks and beds of the UT creek
Catching yabbies and minnows in the water holes
So peaceful and tranquil, it soothed our souls.
As a big family with lots of children, at the last count of six
Dad would help us make yabby nets out of string and sticks,
Mum helped pack our picnics with yummy cookies and drink
Then off went the kids with their nets and lines to sink.
We would fish and play for hours each day
When returning back home we always had lots to say,
We talked of the fun and adventure and things we explored,
Never a dull moment and we were never bored.
A different adventure each time we went down to the creek
Sometimes, just to play, hide and seek
Other times we would swim in a deep water hole and splash about
Then hang our clothes on the tree branches, just to dry out.
I look back now and recollect how we made our own fun
And how we looked out for each other, including the youngest one.
I give thanks for Nature’s Playground and its beauty galore
And our wonderful country, with so many rivers and streams to
explore.

RUNNER UP – Open Category, POEM

“The Battle for Water”

by Toni Geurts–Nathalia

By the banks of the dry creek bed
Stands a lonely figure
His eyes downcast
He weeps
He is a broken man....

The government has declared
That a pipeline will take
Vital water from this drought ravaged land
And send it to the city folk
To flush their waste away
Came the call to farmers far and wide
To fight this monstrous plan
“Whiskey’s for drinkin’
And water’s for fightin’ over”
Mark Twain once said
The battle has just begun.

Hundreds gathered in Shepparton
To vehemently voice their opposition
“We have got to join together
This fight is not over by a long way
We will continue to fight it
Until we get a sane outcome”
Said Fran Bailey as she addressed the crowd
“Plug the Pipe” they chanted
The fight has just begun.

Utes, trucks and busses converged on Parliament
As the protest gained momentum
They marched down the city streets
With placards raised high
“Take our water, Eat our Dust” they cried
A war of words has just begun.

The Premier called them liars and their claims of robbery bizarre,
“Less water in the region – it’s just not true” he said
The farmers asked the questions
But no one could answer them
“Put a plug in it” became their cry
As they went on their way
The fight must go on.

Now we hear that water can only come
From water savings audited
But the cost to city folks will be high
They should now be counted
And together with their country mates
March to save the land
The battle must go on.

By the banks of the dry creek bed
Stands a lonely figure
His eyes look up to the heavens
He weeps
He is a farming man....

HIGHLY COMMENDED– Open Category, POEM

“The Spirit of Place”

by Margaret Ryan

I know a place where water lies,
And waders feed at its edge.
A place where ducks breed and hide,
Amongst grasses, reeds and sedge.
I know a place where kingfisher fly,
And dive in the waters below.
A place where plovers strut and cry,
And Gang Gangs come and go.

I know a place where platypus swim,
And build burrows in the bank.
A place where lyrebirds dance and sing,
In a gully dark and dank.
I know a place where galaxias spawn,
Aquatic plants sway in the flow.
A place where rushes rattle at dawn,
When the chilly south winds blow.

I know a place where elusive damselfly
Hover over grass and reed.
A place where martins swoop and dive,
And catch insects for a feed.
I know a place where morning sun,
Reflects and shines like jewels.
A place when all the day is done,
Moonlight dances on its pools.

WINNER– Youth Category, Short Story

“If Only....”

by Samantha Anderson- Yarrowonga

A loud cry screeched through the air startling them all. It was unexpected and shrill hurting their ears. An eagle gracefully hovered above the water waiting for its' prey to appear near the surface again. Its shriek, loud and clear, blasted around them. Leila put her arm on her husband as she leaned closer to his head to whisper, “dear, I think you'd better turn it down.” Leon complied automatically, his eyes never leaving the in-home theatre covering the entire living room wall.

The eagle dived so powerfully and yet so magnificently that he gave a quiet gasp in awe. His son, Michael, quietly fidgeted on the floor in between his knees. He was only four years old and didn't really appreciate the documentary unlike his older sister Rochelle who was sitting in the cream sofa, enthralled. Next to him sat his darling wife. He focused on her. Her once vibrant bouncy mouse-brown hair had lost its' shine and now a dull brown. Her face had a few wrinkles which had never been there before and purple bags under her eyes just illuminated them more.

He could remember a time when she hadn't had any wrinkles or bags and her skin was flawless. It was before they were married, the first time they had met. He stared at the wall but did not see the eagle or hear its cry echoing through the subwoofers. He was in the past, the year 1998 in Bruce's Beach along the once beautiful Murray when he was 18 years old. It was early morning, the sun just peeping up behind the trees. It was already starting to get hot so him and his four other friends and all their girlfriends including his, Leila. They had packed a large cooler. He laughed silently to himself at the type of technology that they had then. It was so primitive compared to now. They had walked on the warm sand, acting like children when it worked its way through their toes.

They carried fishing rods, worms, food and towels, the guys carrying the heavy stuff while the girls looked for a good spot to fish. Finally they came upon a beautiful place. White sand covered the ground and was cool from the shade given by the tall magnificent red-gums, home to the chirping cicadas. To look back on it now, it seemed foolish to not enjoy that place, the river and its' inhabitants a lot longer. But no one was to know how quickly it could go.

He remembered trying to show off to Leila, boasting about what an experienced fisher he was and what a big whopper of a fish he would catch. From there it seemed to go disastrous – for him anyway. He actually got a bite, and remembered the pure elation at actually catching a fish for the first time in his life but completely forgot to wheel it in or to stand properly.

Even if he had done it all properly he wouldn't have had a chance because no sooner than he got a bite then he was off his feet straight into the icy water of the Murray River. The current, stronger than he had thought or expected at the time pulled him around the corner

into some snags. Thank goodness for those snags, he thought now, otherwise he probably would have kept going down stream.

His friends and Leila were yelling from the shore urging him from the water but he foolishly ignored them, gripping onto a slimy log. He started to wheel in the fish even though his arms, legs and well his whole body were hurting from being smashed and battered against some invisible underwater stumps. He was being yanked and pulled from the struggling fish still on the end of his line.

It was sometime before they got it near enough to wrap in a towel even though everyone had ended up in the water, sitting on a log helping him reel it in. it was a Murray Cod. And it was huge. And slimy, making the girls squirm. He laughed as he remembered how he was wet and shivering and ended up with a cold with his sweetheart Leila looking after him.

Looking back now he was saddened that the Murray, its life, our lives could be changed so dramatically in such a Short time. Getting back to the present he was surprised to find that it was near the end of the movie, the last bit of the Murray that was left.

A single tear gently rolled down his cheek landing on his wife's hand. She looked up in surprise and seemed to immediately understand. She whispered close to his ear so the children wouldn't hear, "I know how you feel. I just wish we had of acted sooner to save it so that our kids could have had that freedom and choice too." He gave her a shaky smile and turned his attention to Michael who was poking him in the knee.

RUNNER UP– Youth Category, Short Story

“River Constellation”

by Emily Cauka—Mansfield

I remember a time when I would run down the paddock with my hands up and a towel grasped in them, I waved like a flag. I would jump and skip as the soft grass turned to the smooth, hot hard stones. Then the sudden coldness, the sparkling diamonds felt wonderful when they landed as droplets on the skin, then evaporated. I loved swimming in the river that was until the water disappeared. My sister and I were waiting all week for this Saturday. We knew it was going to be a scorcher, and would be a perfect day to go swimming. We raced down the river; we didn't realize the mud, until Marie-Rose fell. I stopped; there was no water in the river. Marie stopped next to me. Then it happened all too quickly, as my sister stopped she slipped on the smooth stones that were hidden in the mud. As she fell I tried to catch her but I fell too. When I got up I crawled towards Marie,

“Hey Marie, you ok? I whispered there was no reply. I crawled closer towards my sister, but stopped as I put my hand in something warm and sticky. As I looked at my hand, my eyes went blurry but unmistakable it was, red blood. I woke up on the mouldy couch, I couldn't remember much, but as my memory came back I started to scream. Now I'm scared of the river, but I always swim when I look at the stars and see myself and my sister playing in the river constellation.

HIGHLY COMMENDED– Youth Category, Short Story

“A Haunting; A haunting we will go!”

by Millie Bye - Yarrawonga

I'm a ghost. Do you have any idea what's it like to be a ghost? Well no you wouldn't because if you did you wouldn't be reading this because I don't think ghosts can read. Well I don't know because I didn't read when I wasn't a ghost so why will I read when I am a ghost? Maybe there are ghosts that read but not me.

What gets me is like why people don't tell you what things are dangerous because obviously if you die from it then it must be pretty dangerous, don't you think? Well that's what I'm thinking. My mother told me not to ride my bike without a helmet because it's dangerous, my mother told me not to ride my billy cart into on going traffic because it's dangerous and not to go skydiving without a parachute because it's dangerous but she never told me not to play Frisbee because it's dangerous not even when I grabbed the Frisbee off the bench and went out the door and did she say 'Jezza be careful playing Frisbee.' Bet she wished she did.

But she didn't so I grabbed the Frisbee and Bob the dog and off we went. I like walking with Bob, Bob never answered me back, Bob thought I was the best, Bob never said 'Jezza grow up', Bob never said 'be quiet Jezza, don't be stupid Jezza.' I think Bob was a very intelligent animal probably the most intelligent animal ever.

We walked until we reached our favourite watering hole, it had everything—shade, tyre swing, and fish – and had the greenest and nicest grass ever. Bob and I loved it. If I threw the Frisbee he would get it and bring it back, if I threw a stick he would go and get it and bring it back and if I ran he would chase me just like we were playing tiggy.

Last Saturday we caught two fishes, we made a fire and ate the fishes they were real tasty. Me and Bob, we have the touch, they melted in our mouths. Today we couldn't catch any fish, Bob wouldn't let me **near** the water, if I went near the water Bob would knock me over and jump all over me. I guess he thought something was going to happen to me. Maybe he knew Frisbee was dangerous. I heard people say dogs have got a sense when something is going to happen.

When I threw the Frisbee in the water Bob wouldn't go in to get it so I had to get it. When I went to get the Frisbee, Bob knocked my knees and I fell in the mud, all he'd let me do is stretch out to get the Frisbee and I said "what is your problem Bob?" I patted his ears and said "Let's get something to eat." He looked at me and barked and I opened the bag and said "Look Bob, Mum loves us, she packed us roast beef rolls, chocolate cake and two nice juicy apples." Odd how a dog likes apples hey!

We were so full so we lay down and went to sleep and I put my head on Bob's belly and we slept for ages and ages until I hit Bobs butt and said "get up lazy butt lets play." I would throw the Frisbee near the water and he wouldn't go and get it so I threw it the other way and he would run and get it . Once I threw it to high it landed in the tree. I climbed up to get it and Bob started barking and barking and I told him to shut up.

I just had to get a bit closer to get it so I shuffled along. That was when I heard the crack and I knew Bob heard it too because he was going mental but I needed to get the Frisbee because it's just a boy thing you just can't leave a good Frisbee sitting in a tree.

So I just as I touched the Frisbee it happened ...The next thing I know was that me and the Frisbee and the branch are heading towards the water. I must have hit my head on a rock because everything is looking kind of blurry and all noises weren't close like Bob was barking but really far away and water was far away. It was like I wasn't connected to any of the sounds I could hear and that's the truth I wasn't connected to them. It was then that I saw a light. "Don't head to the light Jezza, just don't." Oh no I'm heading to the light! Jezza do you ever do what you are told to do?" Then I could see stuff like Bob dragging me out of the water. It was like I am there but I am here watching it but how can I be here and how can I be there?

Bob's looking at me and licking my face but I can't feel him licking me. Then Bob takes off barking and running but I don't seem to be moving. Not either me not the one watching but me, the me being watched, isn't moving neither. Am I dying? It doesn't hurt if I am. I don't feel a thing. It doesn't seem to take long until Bob's back and mum's with him running and she has her hands to her face and says "Oh my god, Jezza no!" She runs forwards and falls to her knees and shakes my shoulders and says "Jezz? Jezza!" I don't answer her, not even when she calls me Jeremy Joseph , you know you're in trouble when she calls you that.

She starts crying and gets out her phone. "Please someone come, I think Jezza is..." she stops talking. What do you think Jezza is, Mum? "Jezza, Oh god Jezza! I think Jezza is dead." Mum there's no need to cry, it didn't hurt and nobody new Frisbee was dangerous. I've been a ghost now for nearly 12 weeks. Mum still cries and even my sister cries. I didn't think my sister liked me that much. I talk to Bob all the time. He can see me, the first time his hairs on his back of his neck stood up and did the low growl but now he just wags his tail in circles. Mum says "Are you crazy Bob?" I'm glad he can see me, he loves me. It's not that Bob loves me more than Mum loves me. It's just all that other human stuff gets in the way. But I can get mum to know I'm there if I try hard enough. I stand right near her and whisper "I love you so much Mum." She stops what she is doing and turns around and her eyes are full of tears but all she can see is Bob's tail going around like a helicopter. She bends and pats his ears and says "you miss him too fella."

I told you animals have an extra sense or one that's not clogged up by life. Bob knows that there is another world, he feels it all the time but Mum only feels it sometimes. I wish she could see me but I know that all the time she knows I love her. Because I know that for all my life and all my death. She loves me.

WINNER– Youth Category, Poem

“Long time gone”

by Chelsie McPherson- Christ the King College Cobram

The rivers just a puddle now
No longer flowin’ strong

The trees are dyin’ everyday
Wont be long till there gone

The cod are swimmin’ in muddy water
They have nowhere to go

The places where we used to swim
Are gettin’ very low

The sand is dry and grainy
And hot against bare feet

We look at the dead grass
Where the kangaroos liked to eat

The reeds are stuck on dry banks
With no water to quench their thirst

To many poor farmers
They Say this land is cursed

Houses that look over the river
Are now cheap as chips

All they get to look at
Are little muddy pits

Channels, creeks and billabongs
Where the grand kids used to play

Are just shadowy places
Where cows like to lay

The river once was beautiful
Current runnin’ Strong

The places we called our sanctuary
Are really almost gone...

RUNNER UP– Youth Category, Poem

“I wish there was something...”

by Rebecca Thomas—Mansfield

The water cries out to me,
as I walk alone towards the river,
like I do everyday.

Today, it seems lower than normal,
so that I can see the surprise of the bottom...

In the water I see a reflection

And dirt, snags and rubbish,

A fish ensnared
in rubbish.

Save the fish!

Let them swim away!

Nobody fishes here any more.

Too much noise,

Cars and machines,

Rubbish everywhere.

I am scared that no-one does a thing.

We might have it everywhere.

A last breath before I leave...

I wish there was something I could do...

HIGHLY COMMENDED– Youth Category, Poem

“The river runs...”

by Adam Driscoll—Yea

The river runs, the lifeblood of the planet flows through its veins.

The veins...

The banks and basins that hold the water

The water...

The life force of the planet and humanity, blue as the cloak of a hero,
Clear as the purest ice.

The storm breaks, like that of an army let loose on a defiant village.

The water hits the ground, splashing as if telling a story by its wonderful dance.

He forests erupts in that of thousands of drops dancing till their life's end, only to be reborn
and to continue as life dictates

WINNER– Junior Category, Short Story

**“My Big Adventure!”
by Lachlan Hardman—Tallarook**

Vroooooom, vroooooom, vroom, a white shape speeds overhead, it's huge slicing blade just misses me as it slows to a stop just 50m away. A large shiny hook lands in the water next to me. I do not dare to look, as a fish starts to nibble on the bait. I look back and the hook, along with the fish is gone. I look around for any more dangers. None. Only the light splash's of the cool, clear water. I start to head home with my shimmering scale's shining in the sunlight. It's a long and hard swim up stream where my house is. There is a lot of oil running down stream from the fishing boats. My old rusted house is an old fishing boat where we are safe from fisherman, larger fish and stomping feet. I swim into the large hole in the side of the boat and call to say I'm home, no reply. I call again and still there is no reply. I start looking everywhere in the boat. Nothing. I take the search out-side and look in every possible spot. Then I hear an ear splitting scream. I head further up stream, there they are trapped in a yabby pot up ahead. As I get closer I can see three large lobsters in with them snapping their massive claws in front of them. I swim up to the pot and try to lift the wire from the net, no luck. It is wrapped around the opening. If I could just unwind the wire then I could get my family out of there. "I'll go get help!" I say. I rush off, through the water looking for my good old friend platypus. He usually lies at the bottom of the river bed where the water is nice and cool. He is strong and much larger than me he should surely make short work of lifting the wire. I dive down deeper and there he is shuffling around in the rocks looking for a good afternoon meal. "Platypus! I need your help, my family is stuck in a yabby pot and there are three big lobsters in there too." Platypus rushes off in front of me. I try hard to keep up, I can just see him in the distance lifting the wire off. Mum, Dad and my brother are free. They are very proud of me but I'm just happy they're safe.

RUNNER UP– Junior Category, Short Story

“The Grumpy Fish from Tallarook”

by Rhys Maude—Tallarook

There was once a grumpy little fish that lived in the Tallarook catchment. He was really mean and grumpy because people kept on dumping things in the water. “STOP DUMPING IN MY CATCHMENT!” yelled the fish. But it was no good, the people couldn’t hear.

The next day a young boy named Marko went to the Tallarook catchment and looked into the water worried because of all the pollution. Long ago he had nearly drowned in the water and as a result he started to go blind while he was in the catchment. He stared into the water and he saw these orange things coming closer and closer to the surface. Suddenly it popped out of the water.

The boy likes to help the fish but he can’t help the fish with his problem now. So he started to think “how can I help? aahm I’ll put up some posters and signs, that’ll get people’s attention” he whispered to himself. Then he ran really fast to his house.

He collected all of the tools he needed he started sawing and hammering. Knock knock knock

“Who’s that?” Marko called

“It’s me; dad son, and what are you doing” said dad

“I’m making signs and walls” Marko replied

“What for?” asked dad.

“To stop people from dumping and polluting in the catchments” said Marko.

“What a good idea, do you want me to help?” dad asked

“Yea all right” Marko said

Now they made the signs and walls much faster than before. Finally they have about 50 of each. “Finally it’s done” said Marko. “Yeah, I need a rest” said dad tiredly. “Not now dad we have to go” nagged Marko.

They both carried the signs and the posters and dropped them into the trailer. Then they got in the car. Marko and dad got out of the car and started hammering and nailing the signs into the ground. After they finished the signs Marko and Dad put up the posters. They finally finished everything but when it was 7pm at night.

The Little fish was very happy the next day; nobody had dumped in the Tallarook catchment. Marko came and looked into the water and it was really clean.

HIGHLY COMMENDED– Junior Category, Short Story

“Splash”

by Sam Burrowes – Benalla

“Who wants to go fishing?” asked my Dad.

“I do!” I said.

“We better get the rods”, my Dad answered.

“Got them”, I replied. “Now all we need is the bait.”

“We don’t need to worry about that now. We can buy some at the shop where we’re going.”

Off we went. We were going up the Murray River to try and catch a cod. It was the first time I had been to the Murray, so I needed to know the rules. But before my Dad could tell me, I had sprinted down the bank, and reached for a stick in the water. All of a sudden I fell in! I swam to the bank and climbed out. I was dripping wet. Luckily Dad had brought a towel. He then told me the rules

1. Don’t go in the water past your bellybutton.
2. Don’t go too far into the bush.
3. Never! Go out into the current.
4. Don’t go too far up stream.

“That’s all for now,” Dad said.

We got the rods ready and went out in the boat. When back my cousin’s, Stephanie & Thomas were there. They had their rods ready and so we all went out in the ba(with towels). We had been out a while when I got a bite. I was pulling so hard I tipped the boat over and everyone fell out except for me. I was trapped underneath the boat, but Dad dived under and rescued me. When we got up to the surface everyone put in to tip the boat right side up again. When everyone was in again, I got a rope from the front of the boat and tied it to the back, I then tied the other end around my waist. I jumped out the back of the boat. Dad turned the motor on and I skidded along the water like the Loch Ness Monster.

When we got back Steph, Thomas and I all went for a swim. After that I came up with the idea to go exploring, but Steph didn’t think that was a good idea, so only Tom and I went. We were about a mile and a quarter upstream when we found a yabbie net. I reached down to get it an luckily I didn’t fall in this time. We went back to camp to put some bait in the pocket. When we had done that, we went out in the boat and put it in a bunch of logs. When we were back it was lunch-time. After lunch we went down onto the beach and found a ball and a rusty old bowl. Then Tom came up with the idea to make tracks for the ball. We also made jumps at the end of each track. Finally we got to test it. Tom stood at the end, Steph stood at the side and I rolled the ball. On the second roll, it was time to go. “Oh!”, I wailed.

“Sam, Steph & Tom are coming home with us,” Dad said.

So we went home.

We had the best time ever.

WINNER– Junior Category, Poem

“Our Waterways”

by Isabella Cimo – Kinglake

Ours forever
Under the depths lie mysteries never seen before.
Really beautiful at the moment.

Will the beauty last?
At time, rubbish is found which is not good.
Think how a water animal thinks, become that animal, river life is not so good from that
view.

End the pollution NOW!
Realising other animals’ troubles will help our waterways.
Why do people dump rubbish?
Always be on the look out for rubbish-pick it up don’t leave it there.
You should never dump it!
Save our waterways!

RUNNER UP– Junior Category, Poem

“Drought”

by Melissa Peart – Marysville

Rivers and lakes dry up,
Dams and tanks run dry,
Farmers and animals struggle,
Water restrictions apply.

Drought envelopes the country,
With dust storms and searing heat,
Bushfires roar across the land,
How can the farmer compete?

Highly Commended– Junior Category, Poem

“Drought”

by Amity Lees – Alexandra

Clouds, clouds please make it rain,
So we can have some water again.

Our rivers and dams are low,
Our farmer's need their crops to grow.

This drought makes me shout!
What can we do to help out?

Save our water and our trees,
So we can have clean air and see green leaves.