



2025 FRESH FICTION WRITING COMPETITION WINNERS

Winning entry in the 7–12 category: [Anaayah Jain](#)

Winning entry in the 13+ category: [Phoebe Ladomery](#)

Laila's First Day By Anaayah Jain

Laila stepped into the classroom like a shadow slipping into the light, her heart thudding like distant thunder, quiet but impossible to ignore. The air buzzed with voices she couldn't understand, words flying around like birds she couldn't catch, and every face already had somewhere to turn, someone to smile at, a story to share.

She stood still for a moment, feeling like a misplaced puzzle piece, her feet heavy as stone, her courage shrinking with each breath. The teacher's voice was warm, but even kindness felt far away when you're surrounded by strangers and silence.

It was the middle of Australian winter, the sky outside the windows a dull silver, the air inside laced with the chill of damp coats and cold classroom tiles. The trees were bare, the wind sharp, and the scent of eucalyptus lingered in the corridors. Laila missed the warmth of Lebanese spring, where the hills turned green and wildflowers painted the fields with colour. She missed the soft sunlight on her face and the smell of za'atar bread baking in her grandmother's oven, mingling with the lemon blossoms swaying in the garden breeze.

She found a seat at the back, her desk cold beneath her arms, the day unfolding like a locked book in a language she could barely read. Maths blurred, English twisted, and at lunchtime, she sat alone while laughter drifted past her like music from another world.

But then came art.

A quiet hush filled the room, and the teacher gently said, "Draw something that makes you feel safe."

For the first time all day, Laila's hands moved with certainty. Her pencil danced across the page, bringing her grandmother's house to life—the red bricks warmed by the sun, the lemon tree blooming with golden fruit like glowing orbs of light, the window open, and her grandmother's smile shining like a beacon of love.

She shaded the sky a gentle blue, imagining the spring winds of Lebanon brushing against her cheek. She could almost hear the rustle of vine leaves, the distant call of a rooster, the bubbling of labneh being strained in the kitchen. In that classroom filled with winter coats and foreign accents, she drew herself back into a memory that smelled of warm thyme and tasted like sweet orange blossom.

As she shaded the sky, a voice broke through the silence, soft but clear.

"That's beautiful," said a girl beside her, leaning over with bright, curious eyes. "Is that where you lived?"

Laila looked up, startled. "It's my grandmother's house," she whispered. "In Lebanon."

The girl, Emma, smiled like sunlight breaking through a cloudy sky. "It looks like a dream. I've never been to Lebanon... but now I want to. Want to sit with me tomorrow at lunch?"

The words hung in the air, gentle and golden, and something inside Laila unfroze, like winter melting into spring. One sentence, one small act of kindness, had shattered the wall around her heart.

She nodded slowly, her smile blooming like a flower after rain.

And in that moment, Laila knew that though she was far from home, she wasn't alone anymore. She had been seen. She had been heard. And maybe, just maybe, she was starting to belong.

The First Winter By Phoebe Ladomery

The first winter was bitter, nipping at their toes, wind curdling around and blowing under nightgowns worn for days. Eyes sunken and unabsorbing, days shrouded in light switches too far to flick on. The family doesn't talk. They don't ignore each other, but they don't discuss the fist-shaped hole in the wall next to the front door, where news had been delivered. They don't talk about the small scratches on dark-stained wood floors, cut from glass shards dropped the same moment the fist flew. Dust settled in the far room, down the hallway, blinds hitting the wall each time a chilly breeze shivered through the house, no one daring to step in Her room. No one daring to touch the items, objects with fingerprints belonging to no one now. Now only a ghost haunts them, silent and invisible, but a presence too fragile and dear to let go.

How could they let go?

How could they move on, their faces not dulled by the house itself, but by the constant race of saltwater tears? How could they move on, ignore that day, silent with a drizzle, dressed in shadows? The only warmth in that house was their skin, hearts thrumming and a recorder playing all Her favourite songs.

Spring would come eventually, slow and creeping in like fog and seeping through door cracks, considerate for their vulnerability and sensitivity, guards up but weak. Their soft hums of approval or disapproval grew, slowly, to small chatter about the dishes, but diminished when turned to other things. Setting the table with memories. Unlocking the car with that custom keychain the ghost had picked out those years ago. The laughter at the silly figure back then transformed to fingers lingering over the form, faded but pink still glowing through. But when spring came, their doorstep grew decorated with the ghost's lilies, planted months prior.

A week later, they were gone, soil muddled up and any curl of green or pink gone. It hurt to look at it still, Her soul perhaps reincarnated in that beautiful form. The elderly lady next door had spared them an extra sympathetic glance when she offered them, one tilting to the side, giving the youngest a pat on the shoulder. The ghost watched from afar, wondering, day and night, if they would learn.

Summer that year thawed the icy blockades put up unintentionally between them. The house was empty; this time not hollow but because everyone was out. Turning the aircon on urged them to take that drive, go to that beach. The wind whispered to take their surfboards and swimsuits. Written under their skin, almost like a statement from Her, was engraved with the fact that it would hurt, but it would be good for them.

And so they came back, in that car, seats wet and hair tangled with seawater, solemn music and gazing out the setting sky, giggling about the new memories formed, instead of the old ones lost. Stepping out of the car, however, the house greeted them with the mused soil, walls plain and windows shut. They had left it like this, of course, but now that the house was brimming with enough energy to maybe call it home again, it felt wrong. Wrong not to honour Her spirit somehow, to give a chance for the ghost to live on through beauty like they knew Her. So, a week later, with the help of that elderly lady, who needed no

more than tentative looks to know what was being asked of her, their front porch was then again colourful, lilies thriving.

Finally, this autumn brought weather colder, more familiar. The breeze hugged them familiarly, like the loving embraces She gave. The leaves on branches around the home browned, crunching under eager steps. The ghost's presence was felt then more than ever, Her favourite season shining through. And watching, the ghost hoped that the replanted lilies would last the upcoming winter, staying with them for as long as they needed.

The arrival of April was tender, with laughter carrying through the wind and sneaky eyes stealing chocolate eggs off of tabletops. If She didn't know any better, they were healing. There were moments still, of course, when the house was blanketed in solemn grief, yearn. But it wasn't dark, longing and angry. No, this time it was appreciative. *Thank you*, they said, looking up, not knowing their eyes met the ghost's. No, this time, they let go. They let the ghost go, knowing the flowers would thrive. They let the ghost go, moving on to whatever adventure the seasons had for them now. It would hurt, all the time, but it wasn't a painful hurt. They had learned, they had grown.