

Kernewek Lowender

Max Fatchen Writers' Competition

2009

“A Voice from the Grave”

The winning entries have been reproduced here to the best of the typist's ability. No responsibility is taken for typing errors. The winning entries are for general interest and remain the property of Kernewek Lowender Writers' Committee.

Children's Categories

Max Fatchen Poetry Award – 12 to 18 years

Winner: **“To speak with the dead”**
Gwylim Klippel-Cooper

Max Fatchen Short Story Award – 12 to 18 years

Winner: **“The Scarecrow”**
Gwylim Klippel-Cooper

Highly Commended:

“Unread Warning”
Demelza Walkey

Max Fatchen Short Story Award – Under 12 years

Winner: **“Coal Dust”**
Mitchell Brunker

Highly Commended:

“Olivia’s Bracelet”
Phoebe Oswald

Adult Categories

Max Fatchen Poetry Award

Winner: **“The Ghost of Inneston”**
Kristin McEvay

Highly Commended:

“The lost Children”
Patricia Virgin

“From the Cradle”
Elizabeth Jefferson

Max Fatchen Short Story Award

Winner: **" Wild Geese"**
Ruth Ivens

Highly Commended:

" They called her "Tilly"
Miles Trench

" My Childhood Home"
R.H. Mitchell

Max Fatchen Poetry Award – 12 to 18 years

Winner:

“To Speak with the Dead”

Gwylim Klippel-Cooper

To Speak With the Dead
If you want them to hear you

You must roll
Like the crash of thunder
Or the beat of the drum

You must whisper
Like the cry of the wind
Or the path of an arrow

You must soothe them
Like the crackle of the fire
Or the footprint of a snowflake

You must prowl through their forgotten hearts

Caressing and prodding
Like the swirl of the fog
Or the beat of the rain

If you want to be heard
When you speak with the dead

Max Fatchen Short Story Award – 12 to 18 years

Winner: “The Scarecrow”

Gwylim Klippel-Cooper

The Scarecrow

I remember a story in which a fair and beautiful maiden brushed her long blonde hair while sitting in front of her dressing table mirror. While she brushed, the image of a mysterious man wearing a dark cloak appeared in the corner of the mirror; coming nearer and nearer and nearer and nearer until...

It's not often I find it a comfort to have a short hair but it does mean I don't spend much time in front of a mirror. Certainly not enough for any supernatural being to waste its time on me. At least, that's how I felt until last night when the scarecrow nodded back and spoke.

I had yawned and got to my feet to draw the sitting room curtains and go to bed. Before doing do, I looked through the window at one of those magic nights we country folk get now and then. The moon was full and low in the sky silhouetting the fluttering bats and the twitching tail of a cat extending a cautious paw at a dark patch among the last of the flowering shrubs. The field on the other side of the track I bounce my bike along every morning bore a vestige of the golden harvest that was partly gathered in. The scarecrow standing around 2 to 3 metres behind the hedge looked impassively back at me.

Stretching my arms sideways in a parody of his posture, I gave the tattered, poorly stuffed and badly dressed old boy a nod. ‘In case you hadn't noticed,’ I told him, ‘the crows have roosted and the bunny rabbits are all tucked up in their burrows. It's time for you and me to go to bye-byes, dude.’ And after a quick look round the field, the scarecrow nodded, put both hands to his left cheek in a sleeping posture and said in a scratchy voice, “Sleep tight, don't let the ghosties bite”. He then slowly sank into the ground, like a voice from the grave.

I stood still, my arms remaining stretched out. Is that what I really saw? Did he really speak? I wondered. If so, what do I do about it? This is ridiculous scarecrows do not talk and definitely do not move. Maybe he was possessed! I stared at the empty space the scarecrow had occupied. Should I assume that the stuffing had fallen out his central nervous system, leading to a collapse? Or that a family of field mice had been gnawing at his ankles, bringing him to the ground?

But it's of those and from what I saw and heard I didn't think it was. Do I stand here and clear my head or do I cross the road and stand face to face with the hooting owl and all the other ghosties and ghoulies that howl, creep, leap and go bump in the night? Neither, Run! A little voice inside my head shouted and I followed instructions to the letter.

I laughed nervously, wondered why Ann was never around when I needed her, drew the curtains and went to bed. Next morning, in some trepidation, I drew the curtains back. The scarecrow was in place, more or less. He seemed to be standing a little closer to the hedge than when I saw him last night. Which meant he was standing closer to me. The impassivity of his expression had given way to a leer and his arms had turned slightly forward, as though reaching for me. The twigs representing his outstretched fingers twitched in the light breeze, I didn't dare give him a nod.

Picking up the telephone, I dialed my sister's number. Ann answered. "I can't talk with you right now," she said. "My assignment is due tomorrow and I can not miss the deadline again." "But the scarecrow spoke and moved" I yelled down the phone hoping she would take me seriously. "Only you would say such a stupid thing like that," she snapped. "Goodbye!" "No," I shouted. "Don't put the phone down, Ann. I'm sorry! I've had a very nasty experience. It is the first time a scarecrow has ever spoken to me." "You'll have another nasty experience if I get back and find you've dirtied the kitchen and left muddy footprints on the floor." "You're more likely to come back and find I've been done away with by that talking scarecrow." But Ann wasn't listening. Not really. "I should be finished by 9 o'clock on Thursday if all goes to plan." She said. "When I get home you can tell me all about your nasty dreams then and stop drinking Dad's whiskey, he will find out..."

"It wasn't a dream," I shouted at the dead telephone, my eyes fixed on the scarecrow. "And I have not been drinking. You know I don't like it."

The scarecrow's eyes met mine as I returned the telephone to its cradle. Did he have eyes last night? I couldn't remember. Did he have a mouth? He had one now. How else could he talk? Did he have fingers? I hurried my breakfast, got on my bike, and bounced down the lane, looking the other way. According to our local historian who is very proud of it, the milestone at the end of our lane had stood there for a hundred and fifty years. I had hit it with full speed, petrified that if I slowed even the slightest bit, I would finish up scarecrow fodder.

That night, I warmed up the shepherd's pie Ann had left in the fridge neatly covered in plastic wrap with instruction on how to reheat it written on the top with black pen. Sometimes she made me feel like an idiot! The light was flashing on the answering machine so I listened to the messages, while my dinner was reheating. The first came from Uncle Dave,

"Hey, Peter, your Mum and Dad asked me to call and see if you are alright. I did not see you at the match last night. Not up to mischief I hope, you know what will happen if you wreck the house while they are away. I will drop by later, Bye" Then the beep, beep, beep of the machine played until the next message began.

"Peter, Peter, pick up the phone! Where are you" I heard Ann say. "Heat up the shepherd's pie I left in the fridge," she ordered. "I will be home later then thought but you have your talking scarecrow for company. Don't wait up for me unless you're too scared of the walking scarecrow."

‘Walking? You mean talking?’ I said aloud. ‘I never said it was walking. I said it came closer to the hedge and spoke.’

For it all to appear at all, I reminded myself, the scarecrow would have had to stand up. To come closer to the hedge it must of walked. I nibbled at the shepherd’s pie, pushed the plate away, walked back into the sitting room and gazed bleakly through the window. My parents had gone away for the week and Ann was staying at the university for a couple of nights. My bike was laid up in the garage waiting a new tyre. My nearest neighbour didn’t like me and the next one to him lived across the field beyond the scarecrow. The same talking, walking scarecrow who by now was about to break through the hedge, his greedy fingers reaching for me. I was all alone! Why did it talk to me?

I thought back to the story of the fair and beautiful maiden with a shudder. I couldn’t remember how it ended. I only knew that every night she sat brushing her hair? Better yet, what would of happened if she had not brushed her hair? Would she of thrown the whole thing in reverse, turned the clock back and been saved? Would the cloaked man have receded? Be defeated? Run away and try to find another victim? To terrorize them with his icy voice from beyond the grave.

Very likely he would. The question was, how could I apply it to my scarecrow? I went back to the shepherd’s pie, comforted. I know how.

The next day I left the curtains drawn. That evening I threw them back and shouted, ‘Come on! It’s time to get up and scare all those crows,’ and watched the scarecrow stiffen, step back and look for the birds that weren’t there. Next morning, I peeked through the bedroom window and saw he was halfway across the field, looking disconcerted. I left the curtains drawn, walked down the lane and picked up my bike. That night I threw the curtains back, repeated the call, and saw Ann’s taxi coming up the lane.

I hugged her and she walked in. she looked at me critically and said, ‘That ruddy scarecrow is nowhere near the hedge and it did not say Good night to me, what makes you so special’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied, ‘and if that fair maiden had not brushed her hair, I bet she would have lived to be ninety. Who knows why the ghoulies do what the do!’

Ann didn’t reply. She has an uncanny knack of knowing when no reply was necessary. She did say one thing when she went to bed. She waited until I was ready to turn off the down stairs light and said, ‘Sleep tight, and don’t let the ghosties bite.’ Then she let out a blood chilling cackle and disappeared into her room shutting the door behind her.

Max Fatchen Short Story Award – Under 12 years

Winner: “Coal Dust”

Mitchell Brunker

Coal Dust

The deafening sound of an explosion filled the dark gloomy tunnels as another side tunnel was created. The coalmine in Bobbenhall was a booming industry. Back about eighty years ago a retired butcher was digging a grave for his late cat and discovered a pocket of coal. Miners and investors swarmed over it as it turned into a full blown mine it seemed there was no limit to the amount of coal underground.

Mining was a well-paid job, but it was dangerous. Using explosives could shatter the roof or rooves of tunnels. Braces could collapse under the strain of lifting masses of rock. John was one of those miners who'd been around forever.

John was fifty-three, very close to retirement. He had a huge brown beard that covered his entire chin. His hair was shortly cropped with black spiky sideburns that were always in the way of his corner vision. When he looked at you those pale blue eyes always expressed kindness but you couldn't keep anything from him.

John's hands lifted away from his ears but the ringing continued. As the smoked cleared away the miners quickly and expertly moved in and immediately started chipping away at the coal.

“That's it boys keep it up,” John yelled in his deep booming voice.

When John was overseeing the minors no one ever lost a life. The only time anyone had ever lost a life was about ten years ago.

A minor named Charles Jenkins was always careless with his equipment. So one time he didn't see that one of his braces was eaten through by woodworms. After planting the explosive to expand the section the braces fell down and the roof caved in collapsing the whole section. Luckily all the other miners were on a lunch break or trolleying coal to the big pickup truck. The area was marked fragile so no one went near it to find his body.

A shout went up echoing in the cavernous center space.

“There’s tunnels pre dug over here but they’re too big to have been dug by an animal,” one of the miners shouted.

“What on earth are you talking about Larry,” John asked.

As John walked over to where the supposed ‘tunnels’ were located he saw what the fuss was about. They were tunnels all right; they looked similar to the ones their explosives made. However, it was made using an older brand and make of explosive.

It suddenly dawned on him; this was the section of tunnels that had collapsed on Charles. His leadership skills kicked in at that moment. “Everyone clear the area, this a red zone, repeat everyone clear the area,” he shouted after his realization.

In an instant the miners, forever loyal rushed into the trucks or miner carriers and drove away. John was curious to see more of the tunnels, as even now the incident was a mystery.

The hairs suddenly stood up on the back of his neck. The air around him grew cold and something made John shudder. Something was here, and somehow he didn’t think it was human.

An emotionless voice spoke out from behind him.

“What do you mean boss I am never careless with my equipment, the other miners have nothing on me,” whatever it was protested.

John slowly grabbed a pickaxe and swiveled it in an ark behind him in incredible speed. The axe blew away what looked like a cloudy white vapour.

“Strange, I could swear I heard something,” John muttered to himself.

The voice came back this time on his left.

“Take a hike Jimmy this is my job,” the voice said insistently. “The boss wouldn’t tell you to help me I’m one of the best miners around,” the voice continued.

“Could this be the ghost of Charles,” John wondered.

He slowly turned around to look at Charles. Charles was talking animatedly to what appeared to be nobody. Not wanting to surprise him he slowly moved towards him.

“Hello Charles,” he said in a soft voice.

Charles did not seem to notice this however and kept on talking to nobody. John was thinking of slipping away but Charles was blocking off the tunnel. John prepared to run at full pelt then swung the pickaxe and darted straight into Charles. It appeared that Charles was more resilient than he looked. Trying to talk to him again proved fruitless. He was running out of ideas. Just then Charles turned towards him.

“Oh hello there were you trying to get past,” Charles said in a kind voice.

“Thanks,” John said. “But why are you here, the tunnel collapsed on you,” he gulped. “You should have moved on,” he said nervously.

“To move on I had to achieve one good thing,” Charles explained. “It was my own carelessness that I died in there,” he gestured towards the caved in tunnel. “But thanks to you now I can move on, thankyou John Himmelheimer,” and on that in a gush of bright blue light he was gone.

Someone was shaking him.

“John are you okay one of the rocks hit you firmly in the head, you’ve been unconscious for an hour,”

Larry said kneeling over him. John got up,

“Yeah I’m fine,” he said unsure of himself. “Just a weird dream that’s all,” he murmured.

As they were walking back to the surface John felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

Highly Commended:

“Olivia’s Bracelet”

Phoebe Oswald

Olivia had a beautiful charm bracelet. It was gold link with many special charms on it. Each was a special, memory and she loved to look at each one and remember who gave it to her. She wore it often, not to school, but at home and when she went out. Her mother always told her to look after it as she often lost things. There was a teddy bear on it that was particular special. That was from her nanna, when she went on her last holiday to Perth. She brought it as she often called her care bear. Her nanna died last month in October.

Olivia came home from school on Friday. She had a fun day at school as they had gone on a excursion to a chocolate factory. She went straight to her jewellery box to find her bracelet so she could put it on. It wasn’t there.

“I must have put it in one of my drawers.” Olivia said quietly to herself. She looked everywhere for it under the bed, in her room even under the cushions on the couch where everything seemed to go in her room. She slowly and sadly walked to her mum in the kitchen where she was making Olivia’s favourite meal, Spaghetti.

“Darling is everything all right?” Olivia’s mum said when she saw Olivia’s worried expression.

“No Mum” said Olivia as she burst into tears. “What’s wrong?” said Olivia’s Mum.

“I lost my charm bracelet; you know the one nanna gave me.”

“It’s okay we’ll find it. I’ll look for it in the morning, how does that sound?” Olivia’s Mum said.

“Good.” said Olivia still in tears. “Mum can I please go and put some flowers on nanna’s grave, please while your cooking tea?” asked Olivia.

“I guess you could. There are some flowers on the kitchen table where we are having tea.”

Olivia took the flowers and put them on her nanna’s grave. I’m really sorry that I lost the Charm bracelet nanna. I’ll be more careful in the future I promise!

“Look near the entrance to the cemetery.” said a faint whisper.

“Who said that?” wondered Olivia. I’ll look there anyway Olivia thought. She saw something glittery in the distance. I wonder what that is thought Olivia. “It’s my charm bracelet!” she cried in excitement. She took it and ran home. “Mum, Mum I found my charm bracelet, I found it!”

“That’s great honey and just in time for tea.”

So Olivia and her mum ate the yummiest spaghetti knowing that Olivia was wearing her charm bracelet. Also there was an extra charm on her bracelet but she hadn’t noticed it yet.

Highly Commended:

“Unread Warning”

Demelza Walkey

THEME – A Voice From the Grave

TITLE – **Unread Warning**

PROLOUGE

It was said to be the hottest day in national history. All seven continents shared the same high of 55°c. Most of the wildlife gave up. They couldn't cope. Either that or the vain attempts made by the officials to get them into the air locks.

But they had been warned. And no one listened to the one voice warning them of the end of humanity and the earth itself.

It was black. A surge of solid colour weaving its way through the iron archways and head stones etched with loved ones' poems, all carefully inscribed, moss playing around the edges like an emerald blanket. It was her funeral, my mum's mum and my grandma. I didn't cry-I never did- was an emotionless child according to my mum, a dud, I suppose I took after my dad- a silent strong type. I fit the description for a mourner, my long hair black and limp over my black frock, contrasting with my light ivory skin and my features permanently down-set it seemed. I didn't know any of the other mascara and tear stained faces. But they had known her. Grandma Ruthie, I stood in front, mum beside me and dad behind us, The air was crisp morning air, the sun sheathed behind greyer clouds-keeping the forbidden light from intruding over the scene, We were given long stemmed roses, of course I received the dud one, mine seemed to have been hacked rather than cut cleanly through the stem.

My mum was shaking as she let hers fall onto the maple coffin set in the ground, but as I let mine slip from my fingers, my tattered rose, I felt my eyes finally sting, like a delayed reaction, but it wasn't stinging for tears. Shapes with misty outlines suddenly circled me, beckoning me to follow through, faceless, bodiless swirls. One was more pronounced than the others, the face crystal clear from the small laugh wrinkles by the warm brown eyes and cherry lipped smile. Grandma Ruthie. I knew it wasn't real – ghosts don't exist – but no-one else seemed to notice, in fact several walked straight through her. I clenched my jaw in annoyance, turning sharply away from the face and swirls.

They never left, well she never did. Ruthie seemed happy to inhabit my bedroom. I knew I was going mad. This made it official. I never spoke to mum or dad, or anyone about it. I wasn't ready for asylum life, I don't think mum was ready to admit having a child living in those circumstances. It was a month after the funeral when things seemed to become normal again, but the mixed feelings of sadness and despair was still as thick as fog, winding through our small apartment and along the streets.

Both my parents were on their 20 hour weekend cleaning work when it happened. Grandmas Ruthie had stayed with me since the funeral, never left her post at my window. The occasional ray of sunlight shone through her happily as if it couldn't see her either. Her face had changed; now a build up of worry, I could see it behind her happy eyes and that is probably what made me speak to her.

I bit my thumbnail, staring helplessly at her. She stared back. I cleared my throat and mustered up what courage a 14 year old could in such a situation. She blinked. I could still see the outside blue skies through her, but she seemed real. Was I believing I could see a ghost, of my kind-hearted, lovable grandma?

"Who are you?"

My voice cracked, the words had been built up inside me for so long, they lost their edge.

Ruthie merely raised her shoulders then let them sag again. It hit me that she had just sighed.

"Go away."

Good. Good. I sounded more confident now.

Ruthie's smile twitched around the edges, as if fighting something back, a laugh?

Speech?

My eyes prickled in annoyance,

"Child..."

The only one syllable word made Ruthie's mouth move, she had spoken, my eyes widened a fraction, and from my crossed-legged position on my bed I found myself rigid.

"Dear, dear child, how have you put up with me?"

Ruthie spoke again, stringing words together. It took me longer to register them. Maybe I was mad already.

Loopy. But Ruthie's voice, it was the same as it had been before she died, soft and sweet giving the illusion that a little girl was hidden deep down under the leathery wrinkled skin.

"Oh do stop it, Paisley Maurice Fisher!..Or do you want permanent wrinkles?" She demanded, harsher now. I was taken aback by the use of my full name, later realizing I had been frowning quiet deeply, I felt the crease over my brow, which lessened quickly at her words, "Gra-" "Don't interrupt?" She interjected, suddenly urgency showed in her words, so I clamped my mouth shut, biting the inside of my lip with my teeth.

"No, as I was saying.." She mused, drawing the words out, as if deliberating over what to say, was it a secret?

"Darling.. I'm afraid you're the only one who can see me, so please listen carefully I have a little time before you're human senses will shut me out like..Well a bad odour to put it nicely.."

I watched her uncertainly, was I actually considering believing what I was hearing? It was probably a side affect from losing a loved one. Stress maybe, Ruthie began speaking again, ending my questions effectively.

“There is something you must understand, firstly you are not imagining my being here, although it might seem odd to have the ghost of your grandma holding a speech in your room, but dear I am a spirit, ghosts are not able to be seen by the naked eye, but they are everywhere – several are probably eavesdropping right now..Ah, but that’s not important, what I must tell you, and it’s the very truth, but I must tell you, Paisley..That a worldwide fatal event will occur. I have had the fortunate chance to warn you and believe me it won’t be pleasant. The ozone layer is set to retract completely, after China’s carbon never decreased. And every country will have temperatures rocketing sky high..” She paused, watching me now, her eyes narrowed as she made her observation, “You.. don’t believe me do you?” She whispered –toneless. Peripherally I noted my body language in the full length mirror on my door, I was.. gawking. I gritted my teeth, thinking of a reasonable response, would it matter? What if she was imaginary? Ruthie sighed, “I am **not** imaginary! I can tell you every unfortunate event that’ll happen in the next few months!” –She cleared her throat before continuing “February 2nd an avalanche in Canada will injure several skiers.. March 13th a tsunami will strike in Hawaii, killing several families.. April 1st a 14 million dollar hotel will go up in Adelaide!” She bellowed, every word, her sweet tone evaporating into nothing, her peaceful eyes suddenly on fire.

I ground my teeth together, “Of course I don’t believe you..For all I know you are a hallucination.. Imaginary.. You could be making those all up! And.. and how did you know that’s what I was thinking anyway?” I hissed, almost whinging, as I combed my fingers back through my hair like my mother did when she was trying to calm down. Ruthie rolled her eyes, “Trust me for once when I say you aren’t.. But it’s not natural humans should connect with the after life – It doesn’t work!” She stopped, letting an exasperated sigh escape her cracked lips, not hiding any emotion now, no more little girl voice at all, “Spirits.. Spirits like me and many others.. We.. have things.. extra things, like paranormal senses.. Bonuses.. Well, anyway we can basically see the future, read minds, anything... But we can’t connect with our dear loved ones.. I shouldn’t even be allowed to visit you.. No doubt I’ll be cut off soon.. But please.. Tell someone.. The Prime Minister, Kevin! Or.. A member of Parliament! Please, just do something..And I’ll go – leave you in peace with my warning until six months on the 16th of June..” Ruthie trailed off watching me, pleading almost, her lips in a firm line.

It’s official. I live with an easily annoyed, psycho spirit ghost woman in the form of my grandma warning me about an event that probably won’t **ever** happen.

As I stood in my family’s austere, mouldy smelling, humid living room, the plastic yellow paint peeling phone settled on my lap. I also had a torn scrap of newspaper which I had scribbled the number of the government of Canberra from an Advertisement on TV, it’s not like you could go around finding Kevin Rudd’s phone number – this was as close as I would get.

I sighed quickly, the worst that could happen is the person on the other line would think I’m loopy or deranged.. unless I said I was a certified Psychic.

I shook my head, I was debating with myself over some small unimportant detail. It wouldn’t hurt to try.

I wrapped my now sweating fingers around the receiver, jabbing in the number with my other hand, finally a dial tone sounded.

Deeee....Deeee....Deeee....Deeee

I felt stupid, deliberating over hanging up when the tone was broken by a cheery voice, "Hello, Government of Canberra work place, Susie speaking." The voice began, I opened my mouth to speak when I realized it was a recorded message. One that every caller would hear, "...For queries press 1, for any suggestions press 2, or for further assistance please press 3. Hello Government of Canberra work place, Susie speaki- "The message began to repeat and my fingers fumbled over the number one, a disastrous occurrence in the future that may not be real seemed like a query...I think.

Elevator music began to play – a random upbeat tune that made the caller want to stay on hold. I sighed, beginning to watch the clock, not a good sign, barely aware of Grandma's muttering coming from my room.

Finally a small, slightly muffled voice broke the string of repeating music, and Grandma's muttering, "Hello, sorry.. to.. keep you... waiting.." The man's voice said, breaking up frequently, but at least it was something, it had been at least 20 minutes. I hesitated, trying to think of some reasonable opening part of speech. "Say your name!" Grandma's voice was suddenly harsh and loud in my ear, making me stifle a squeal, "Urgh!" I finally grumbled, finally speaking into the phone, able to hear phone rings, and the man's in the background of the static, "Uh..G'day.. My name is Paisley Fisher and I'm calling.. To..r-report something.." I mumbled, feeling embarrassed, "Alright.." He sounded unsure, as if he knew I was a lanky 14 year old being driven insane by a deceased relative, "Uh..yeah.. I'm 14 but.. well.. my grandma.. says.. She say's the world is going to be destroyed in six months by some mega heat wave or something.. And we're all gonna get wiped out.." I said, quickly, wanting to get it over with. There was silence. Just silence. Well on the other end at least Ruthie wasn't exactly 'quiet'. There was a muffled, higher pitched noise over the static, laughter? I didn't know.. But I think me, Paisley Fisher, has just declared to an innocent male receptionist from the Government of Canberra that I **am** a Lunatic waiting to be picked up.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Adult Category

Max Fatchen Poetry Award

Winner: **“The Ghost of Inneston”**
 Kristin McEvay

We are the the ghost of Inneston from many years long back,
held fast in isolation on a leafy, winding track.
Born sheltered in the scrub our town a quickly growing seed,
our world within a world away had everything we need.

Men blasted out the gypsum from the sprawling silver lake,
and every house wall shuddered from the noise their work would make,
but in the silent moments from not too far away
came the blissful, soothing singing of the waves at Cable Bay.

Left in little heaps, the gypsum glittered in the sun,
Washed and screened then loaded up to make the jetty run.
Hewn from wood around the town, we laid the railway track
And carted loads to Stenhouse Bay then made the journey back.

Moved from the piles stacked on the cliff, lowered by a winch
then heaved onto the jetty, worn hands remembered every inch.
We waited for the ships and between us often said,
“Oh what a sight it is to come ‘round Rhino Head.”

The patient, quiet horses knew where they had to go
harnessed to the carts like fourteen statues in a row.
they slowly hauled their cargo to the jetty at the bay,
Men walked right beside them, united workers for the day.

We manufactured plaster, we manufactured chalk
and gypsum glistened round the town on every street we’d walk.

But it wasn't all that of Inneston, there was much more to it though,
unless you lived there with us there are things you cannot know.

You didn't hear the chatter from the walks around the lake
or smell the homemade bread that the families used to take
on picnics in the scrub where we could hear the whipbird call.
or on the beach collecting shells, who could not love it all?

Come Saturday the gypsum dust was flicked from the filthy pants,
replaced with suits and ties to attend the local dance.
The tennis courts, the picnic sports, the cricket on the lake,
there really was no limit to the fun we used to make.

The town still tells our story in the whisper of the trees,
rusted old machinery and salty summer breeze.
The lake is resting now, its lifetime's work long done
and like out town now spends its time just basking in the sun.

Look closely at what's left behind, but please walk round with care,
it's far from being deserted, our spirit still lives there.
We are the ghost of Inneston, like us your time will fly,
but kept alive through history, we never really die.

Highly Commended:

“The lost Children”

Patricia Virgin

Here in this cold earth we lay alone
and cried our tender tears,
five-hundred strong and more,
a scattered congregation known only
as ‘The Others’ through the years,
missed, mourned and yearned for by
throng of shattered mothers
yet soon forgotten by once loved peers
perfect in health and capering with goats
in sunbright atmosphere
among the shafts, skimps and clatter
of this young copper town
basking in new-found wealth.

Tourists stare now at our small mounds
and sigh a little as in a battle zone,
‘such a waste’ they say in mellow tone
but risen again from our forlornness
we know our infant wars and hours
fought from cots and beds
with vast diminished powers
were short and bloodless in their way,
our souls unshriven for some short time
‘til claimed, we say, by smiling ranks
of golden Saints and Angels
Nurturing our Never-Land
Strewn with the whisper of air flowers.

“From the Cradle” by Elizabeth Jefferson

“Eh you do look a dook*” my mother cried, as cycling shorts I donned,
“But without them, Mum, I’ll get a sore bum, as I ride to the back of beyond,
“Everyone’ll *see* you, an absolute disgrace,
Your Dad would be ashamed of you, the neighbours I can’t face.”

“And where the hell have you been. Lass?” followed a ramble
To the bluebell woods, or hazelnut corpse, or busily picking brambles.*
I just forgot to tell them first, and wandered off alone.
When a murderer was on the loose, I was not to stray from home.
“Get over that settee” mum yelled, preparing me to flay,
“Then go to bed and stay there, you’ll not come out today.”

“Mary brought her school report, Elizabeth, where is yours?”
I mumbled “In my school bag Mum” before I fled outdoors.
At Women’s Club my mum had bragged about my big promotion,
But now I came in last in class, there was a huge commotion.

On Saturday when helping Dad to build a new garage*
I slipped and smashed some paneling, “Ten bob’s worth of damage
For tuppence worth of work,” he said, “Your pocket money’s gone,
You great big clumsy useless girl, now look what you’ve done!”

“Elizabeth, cook your brother an egg, he doesn’t like his meat.”
Nor did I, on fat did choke, when gristle made to eat.
I chewed and rolled it around my mouth, the slipped it ‘neath my plate.
No dessert it was found, before the meat I ate.

Dresses, flounces, jewelry and dollies I despised,
“You should have been a lad” said Mum, “your dolls I’ve advertised
In Sat’day’s* paper; they’re no use to you, you fat tomboy,
Why can’t you be a little girl, and give your mum some joy?”

Sports Day now at school, and in flat races I came last,
Just like when I had to draw, or endure sewing class.
“Flat-foot Floozie” yelled my Dad, “can’t run any faster?”
I lumbered through my childhood from disaster to disaster
Until the cricket field I found, and all the boys bowled over.
My mother got the vapours and I had to run for cover.

Mum and Dad still speak to me, although for years they’re gone.
I was a disappointment , ‘coz I very rarely shone

At anything a parent likes to see their offspring do.

Please give your kids encouragement is my advice to you!

Let girls be tomboys, boys be meek, if that's the way they are.

I know in my heart mine meant the best, as they speak to me from afar.

*"Duck" is pronounced to rhyme with "look"; "Garage" is pronounced "garridge" in Yorkshire;
"Sat'day" is how they say "Saturday"; "Brambles" are blackberries.

Max Fatchen Short Story Award

Wild Geese by Ruth Ivens

Emma folded the map and put it in the glove box confident she knew the way ahead as familiar stands of trees, lichen-covered boulders set immovably in the hillside and a scattering of cottage homes came into view; long remembered and barely changed. It was ten years or more since she had visited the place and six of those she had spent in Ireland where she had gone to live and work with the purpose of searching for her family roots. And there she had met and married Finlay.

Finlay had lived in Australia for only two years and did not know the area at all but now he relaxed at the wheel in anticipation that they were reaching the end of their long cross-country journey. In no time they were at the entrance of the small township of Settler Springs. Under Emma's direction he swung the car to the right fork in the road while she excitedly scanned each building they passed until she cried, "There it is!"

Emma still found it incredible that her Grandfather had left her the house in his will. Even as a young girl she had loved the place, spending countless holidays with her grandparents and getting to know the people who visited the small grocery store which was part of it.

Finlay slowed the car to a halt and Emma leapt out to open the driveway gates. As she did so a passer-by called out a friendly 'G'day' adding a welcome to her sense of homecoming. Taking Finlay's hand she led him along the side path to the back door where she led him along the side path to the back door where she fitted the key into the lock. The door, long unused, needed a push before it swung open with a creak of hinges.

"There are steps in odd places so mind how you go she cautioned him as she encouraged him to follow her on an exploratory tour.

Everywhere within the solid stone walls they were greeted with a silence, peaceful yet resonant with the Past, as though gentle souls keeping out of sight in the shadows shyly awaited their reaction.

The house was clean, reminding Emma of her Grandmother's need for a neat and orderly way of life and her Grandfather's quiet compliance. But far from being oppressive it had always been a

welcoming place for adults and child alike. It seemed to have grown, like Topsy, with no obvious plan, rooms branching out from a central space with nooks, crannies and passageways in unexpected places which gave it an air of charm. A few pieces of furniture remained and with built-in cupboards in most rooms it could be made temporarily habitable.

Emma's excitement grew, bubbling over as she pointed out the potential she hoped Finlay also might be aware of. She had feared he might suggest she sell it and buy a holiday place by the sea which they had often talked about, but he was quiet as they wandered through.

"How old is it?" he eventually asked.

"It must be a hundred and fifty years. I think my grandparents lived here for about sixty years. I guess it's seen a lot of changes in its time. If only it could talk." She sighed.

Talking together late in the evening, with a whole month of leave before them, they decided on a plan of action. They would begin with the largest room which fronted onto a pavement and had been the shop. This they would reorganize to make a comfortable living room.

It was to prove an arduous task but not too daunting. Quite handsome shelves and drawers of varying sizes lined two walls and removing these they decided would be their first job. And it was late the next morning when Finlay took apart the last of the shelving on one wall which to their utter surprise revealed a large fireplace with a raised hob on one side and the iron door of a small bake oven set at an angle slightly above and to the right strength to move it. This done he peered into the shadowed depth where a number of items were visible; a stack of magazines, a large pewter jug and a wicker basket.

Emma, who had come to stand beside him, felt her heartbeat quicken with delighted curiosity as he lifted them out and placed them on the hearth.. it was midday and time for a lunch break. The wicker basket had obvious feminine appeal and Emma carried it with her to the kitchen. Seated at the old kitchen table they ate hurriedly and then began to empty out the contents of the basket. It was filled with what appeared to be letters, postcards and small notebooks. On top, wrapped in tissue paper was a fine, mounted pen and ink drawing. It was signed with the initials A O'C and was of beautifully executed flight of great birds, their long necks suggesting a dramatic purpose to their journey.

Time slipped by as they read on and half way through the afternoon Finlay said,

"My, there's quiet a story here. Who was Albert O' Connor?"

Emma thought for a moment, "Albert was Grandfather's older brother. He was never spoken of but from somewhere I got the impression he was the black sheep of the family."

“Well, read this.” And Finlay handed Emma a yellowed page from an old newspaper. She read aloud,

“Three men, one from the ketch berthed at Port Adelaide on its way to Perth were arrested last night after a brawl in the Waterside Hotel when accusations were made concerning an armed holdup. The one, Albert O’Connor, who denied involvement had in his possession a bag containing gold coins and a number of small pieces of costly jewellery. The men are held in custody impending trial proceedings.

Oh my goodness” exclaimed Emma “this probably explains a lot. A O’C on the drawing! I wonder what more we will find.”

There was no stopping them. They sat into the evening carefully reading through letters and diaries, some written in beautiful copperplate, others in a small neat print and one or two in an almost illegible hand.

Finlay picked up two picture postcards, one from New Norcia and one from Fremantle in Western Australia both addressed to The Misses Finn. He read from one,

‘Best thanks for your note and the precious document which is quiet safe, also for the good news that you escaped the violent storms. Greetings to you all. Yours truly A O’C.’

and from the other,

‘Free again at last. Our plans are all upset. Corina going to Albany while I will continue on to Gladstone in S.A. Will look you up en route if you are not afraid of me. A.O’C. 4.12.04’

Well, what do you think of that? Who were the Misses Finn?”

“I don’t know.”

But later came across part of a handwritten Family Tree which showed them to be cousins of her Grandmother.

One letter in the small neat print moved Emma as she read aloud

“I believe you are innocent, my son. Endure your confinement nobly and with dignity and remember the prayer of the Wild Goose of Iona – ‘And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?’ Finlay, who was the Wild Goose of Iona? Do you know?”

“Yes.” Said Finlay and after a moment or two of deep thought, “This is all falling into place. I think Albert was wrongfully imprisoned and his mother, your great-grandmother, kept faith with him and encouraged him until his release but others did not accept his innocence so readily. That beautiful

drawing is of wild geese, a symbol for the Irish of flight from oppression and hope of achieving freedom and human dignity. Look I didn't think this meant much, now I know it does."

He showed Emma a card he had found among the papers. Written on it in beautiful calligraphy were the words, 'The best revenge is living well.' Finlay continued, "I would say it is the work of Albert who was obviously artistic and along with the drawing of the wild geese is his comment on his unfortunate experience, don't you think?"

Emma was silent then spoke with quiet emotion, "I think the old house has sheltered a secret for us and we have heard a voice from the grave."

My Childhood Home by R H Mitchell

I'm sitting in the dentist's waiting room trying to take my mind off imminent root canal work by idly leafing through a *Home Beautiful* magazine. Articles on "Making Use of Space" or "Bathroom Renovations on a Budget" float past, text and images meld into the background of my mind like advertisements on the side of a passing bus. I'm just about to turn another page when I saw it. Just like that! There, on page forty six... a picture of the first house I remember living in. The peeling paint and tarnished brass fittings on the door had been restored and the house was surrounded by lawns shorn as neat as putting greens on a golf course. Borders built by shrubbery, a herb garden and rose beds glisten on the page. Now, the oak panels on the door look like burnished bronze. They seem to be calling a welcome to me. I trace my fingers up, down and around its glossy frame, close my eyes and let recollections of times past surge and flow around me.

I opened the door, sidled into the hallway and stopped a few steps in at the kitchen door on the left to see my mother as she'd looked in my childhood. She stood tall and slim by the sink, sleeves rolled up past her elbows, piling up washed baking tins on the draining board to her right. Her dark curls were tied up in a colourful scarf with some mischievous tendrils escaping to frame her pale face. Wire trays with fresh-baked loaves sat on the table near an open window and the smell of their freshness tumbled back through the years and made me salivate. The living room, to the right of the kitchen, was where we spent winter evenings playing board games and reading and where sometimes in the morning, lines of dust motes could be seen stretching from mullioned windows onto surfaces of cluttered furniture.

Six doors on each side of the long linoleum-covered passageway that trailed beyond the entrance had our names printed on sticky paper. But the aged sticker on the door of the last room on the left at the end of the lobby was labeled *The Empty Room*. No one slept there. The truth is, the empty room was full to the ceiling with remnants, rejects, cast offs and junk that had been thrown into the corners because we didn't know where else to put the detritus of our disordered life. This room was so full of great stuff we often called it "The Glory Hole". An observer could read our family's social history by a quick look around this refuge. Tents and poles, ground sheets, water bags, a primus stove, and torches. Tackle boxes, fishing rods and waders. Bikes and bike parts lay beside punctured tubes and tyres. Boxes and bags overflowed with georgette, calico, tweed and velvet superseded fashions. Flapper dresses from the twenties snuggled into knee-length skirts and shoulder-padded jackets from the forties. Piles of books in the corners were stacked beside boxes of magazines and past issues of *The Wizard*, *Boys Own*, *Girls Own* and the *Dandy* and *Beano* comic books. And there, in a corner, was a three-wheeled doll's pram beside a doll's house

with a hole in the roof where Moses, our kitten, would peek at us through green cellophane windows.

We never knew where our belongings had gone. When one of the boys asked ‘Where’s my cricket bat?’

Mum, shrugging her shoulders as she bent over the kitchen sink or stove would answer,

‘Och, it’s likely to be in the empty room.’

‘Where’s my lunch?’ or ‘where’s my white socks?’ from one of the girls got the same response.

Sometimes, wanting to test whether Mum was listening or not, one of us would ask a question while the others giggled and smirked behind her, moving our mouths to mimic her predictable answer.

She’d turn round real fast like a whippet after a rabbit, laughing and saying,

‘I ken what you lot are up to’ and she’d pretend to swipe us with whatever she had in her hand (usually a tea towel or a wooden spoon). Poor Mum, trying to keep ten feral children in order was a task far beyond her energy levels.

One days, when the rain was fine and soft she’d send us to the empty room to tidy things up. But our idea of putting things in order was having a dress-up party and we’d start with the boxes and bags of old clothes. One typical day my twin sister Chrissie and I dressed to the nines trying to imitate glamorous women we’d seen in movie magazines. I teamed a moth-eaten fox fur with a bottle-green satin backless dress that fell in folds at my ankles and trailed two feet behind me. Elbow length white gloves with about twenty buttons reached to my shoulders. And on my head, a brown cloche hat with a faded silk rose fastened on its rim.

‘The hat doesn’t go wi’ the dress’ Chrissie said.

‘But I like the hat...it feels soft...and I like the rose...see, the green match okay. I feel like a queen.’

‘Well, lah dee dah, I’d rather be dancing.’ Chrissie spat back at me, pulling on a black pleated jitterbug skirt, and a soft blue crepe de chine blouse with wide shoulders. Then she needed my help to strap wedged-heel shoes with narrow bands of black patent leather around her ankles.

‘Your shoes don’t match Chrissies and you’ll fall and break your neck if you try walking in them.’ I said, seconds before she toppled onto a box of old curtains.

‘Doesn’t matter if the shoes match...they’re pretty and elegant,’ she taunted, struggling to her feet and flicking her hands down her front. ‘Besides they make me look tall and lanky.’ We slung every strand of colourful beads we could find around our necks and took on the posture of hunchbacks with the weight of them. Chrissie never wore a hat for dress-ups. Her hair was thick, dark, auburn and lay in soft waves half-way down her back and settled over her left eye, in the style of Veronica Lake. My brothers sometimes called her Veronica Puddles and she’d toss her head and stomp across the room as if she was the star of some film.

The boys were supposed to sort out the piles of comic books and magazines but they spent their time cutting out images of Johnny Weissmuller or a spitfire plane, or the title page of a magazine showing a car or a Sherman tank. They attached these to the walls with cobbler’s tacks or drawing pins.

Mum looked in now and again saying things like; ‘You’ll be a fine artist one o’ these days Johnny’ or ‘you look right bonnie in that dress Jean, green brings out the shine in your eyes.’

Chrissie preened in front of her asking, ‘Who am I Ma?’

‘Och, you’re a film star...can’t mind the name but you look just like her- maybe even better looking.’ And we laughed like children at a circus.

Sometimes, on fine days, we’d resurrect the old camping equipment and two small tents assembled in our yard became a tent city, an army camp, or perhaps an archaeological dig. We’d get our eldest brother Joe to help us print notices about particular activities. Something like:

Archaeological Project

Entry only to approved personnel

Others – Keep Out!

Digging for “prehistoric artifacts” meant we had to stash them in secret places sometime before the hunt. The treasures could be shards of pottery or broken china; perhaps a rabbit’s foot or a tin of buttons. After they’d been “found” we’d catalogue and classify them in jotters ruled and headed with columns describing the item, date, who found and where found. The digging left us with smudges of dirt on our faces, black under our fingernails and holes all over the yard.

Back then, the house was separated from Farmer Young's field by a picket fence which had flaky bits of white paint that waved about in a breeze and gaps here and there where the slats should be, like the spaces left by missing teeth in an ancient mouth. Once, Chrissie, Johnny and I found our grandfather's spare set of false teeth, we put it in an empty polish tin and buried it in a corner of Young's cow patch. Tommy told Mum, and in spite of cries 'It wasn't me...it was him/her!' or, 'He/she made me do it!' we were sentenced to early bedtime and no pudding.

Our days in the glory hole came to an end one day with the news that Aunt Peggy, Uncle John and their two children were coming to live with us for a while. They had come home to Scotland from Canada for an extended holiday. When World War II broke out they had to stay on our side of the Atlantic until it was safe to sail back to Canada. Waiting for the changes to our life was like having the sword of Damocles hanging from the ceiling of the empty room.

'So Ma...because of the war, we have to put up with Peggy?' Johnny asked.

'That's right, m'dearies, the inspector of works is comin' to check you all out and it's *Aunt* Peggy – remember that.' Mum said, looking out the nearest window into the long distance and smiling. It was as if she could see the cavalry and wagons labeled **"RELIEF"** galloping towards her.

'Aunt Peggy!' Chrissie snapped, 'she's too bossy and crabby...she'll have us cleanin' from mornin' 'til night. I'm tired just thinkin' about it.'

Peggy was my father's sister who'd spent many years in America and Canada as a housekeeper to wealthy families. She was a short roly-poly owl-like woman who wore a hair-net and aprons with large pockets as she bustled around glaring at us over her glasses. I knew she had a sense of humour because sometimes I'd catch her and Mum laughing over a cup of tea in the kitchen, but she never laughed with us.

Our favourite names for Peggy were "Disinfectant Dinah" or, "Commander In Chief" (Cee Cee); used only when she and Mum were out of earshot. The empty room and another next to it were allocated to our visitors and the minute they arrived Peggy declared war. 'What in heaven's name is a bicycle doing in here?' 'Take that out! Move those shoes! Make some space in here! Pick up this box! Find a container for the rubbish! Get those scraps of paper off the wall! Open these curtains!'

And how she lectured Mum! 'Now Janet, you're far too soft...it's time these weans were taught a few lessons about responsibility...you can't run this house all by yourself...they're old enough to at least take charge of their own personal things and help

you with day-to-day chores. Either that or you'll have to get paid help – maybe someone in the village could use the money.'

Mum, mouth twitching with desperation, responded, 'I've tried that Peggy. Three different women have started but none of them could cope wi' this rag-taggle bunch.'

'Well I'll cope.' Peggy announced, pursing her lips and glaring at no one in particular. Then she made a list of duties and orders as long as the hallway and stuck it on the kitchen door.

My mother's attitude to cleaning was 'Och just give it a wee wipe...that'll be fine.'

Peggy's was; 'clean it till you can see your face in it.'

By the end of the first day, the glory hole was empty and bare. Piles of our treasures lay stacked and classified in the back garden. Some ready for storage in a neighbouring hut and some to be taken to their final resting place at the local rubbish dump.

A retired painter from the village distempered and stippled over the walls with enough coats of soft pastel shades to obliterate the battle-ship grey paint, and Mum busied herself making lacy curtains. The next thing was a removal truck arrived with beds, bedding, and wooden tea chests full of our visitor's belongings.

The wooden chests were immediately assessed as new, unexpected resources. We saw fortresses...shops...a theatre and stage. We started planning variety shows using the tea chests for stage settings and props and when they'd been emptied, we carted them to the farthest corner of our property. Peggy worked from early morning to past our bedtime in every room in the house. She cleaned, washed and polished anything that got in her way of domestic perfection. Before the invasion, the surfaces of sideboards and little tables had been popular resting places for books, games, half made models and half-mended clothes – and layers of dust. Suddenly they became shiny mahogany and cedar supports for reading lamps and china ornaments.

Peggy was a part time ogre. She was also a great teacher. In line with her favourite mantra; 'a place for everything and everything in its place', she allotted each of us personal space for our new belongings and in spite of her domineering attitude, I began to like this new arrangement. I liked wearing clean, ironed clothes. I like to see the wood grain in our beautiful furniture become visible with a bit of attention. I discovered that I liked things to be clean and tidy. I especially liked having my own space and knowing that all my books had a spot for safekeeping. I learned from Peggy that organization saved a lot of time. I learned that there were more efficient ways to look after one's treasures and belongings.

Mostly I learned that happiness comes in many forms and that structure and discipline have their own rewards.

When the war ended, Peggy and her dearies left Scotland and returned to their home in Canada. Sea-going trunks and new wooden tea chests were packed and picked up by the shipping company. The last room on the left at the end of the lobby was empty again. Although, by the time the *Castel Felice* had left the port of Greenock with our Canadian cousins, our glory hole was in the process of being restored to its old days of chaos. But now we had lovely coloured walls and lace curtains and the sticker on the door said “The Palace”.

‘Mrs McKendrick?, Mrs McKendrick, Doctor McLelland will see you now.’

The voice penetrated my fantasy. I flapped my eyelids and focused on the white uniform and smiling face of the nurse. The magazine, still open at page forty six, had slid to the side of my lap. I took a last look at the picture, closed it and placed it on the table in front of me. The nurse looked puzzled as I dabbed the corner of my eyes with a tissue. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘Yes...yes, I’m fine thank you. I think I dozed .’ I said, following her into the dentist’s room.

They Called her ‘Tilly’ by Miles Trench

And the wind, always the wind: its whispered secrets forever shape the sheoak’s nod and sway. Old Guyani sits cross-legged beneath the ancient tree, listening. At her feet is a cairn of limestone, the rocks once gathered with care, now lie tumbled, lichen-flecked, a pile in disarray. Guyani, her dark eyes closed against the harsh light, inhales a heady sea-tang that drifts in from beyond the dune. Faces fill her mind; they appear and dissolve as in a dreaming of long ago. Old bones creak, her head drops and her chins comes to rest against her withered chest. Her mind wanders into memory and quiet. One face appears foremost, as always – his features clear through the haze of time. And in her mind she walks, and as she walks she calls... “Marrula, Murrula, brother are you there?” And the wind sings softly in reply: *I am here Guyani, yes, I am here...* And she remembers...

Guyani sat on the edge of her cot, the smell of melaleuca sap and kerosene filled the hut, the lamp on the table throwing a wavering glow upon three small, plump bags: one of sugar, one of flour and one filled with tea, all precious articles and hard to come by – presents for her brother. She rose, went to the door and peered out into the night. No sign. *Soon, my brother will come, soon.* She was too tired to remain standing so she sank back onto the bed. The days were long and hard working for the Kilkierneys, and she was still only young. Guyani was almost asleep when she heard a crack of twigs and the door to her hut swing open. Unannounced, in strode Madison, the farmer’s only son. His sharp eyes took in her surprise and fear as with measured step he moved towards her.

Guyani stifled a cry and jumped to her feet, but Madison was quick, he seized her arm and shoved her roughly back onto the bed. There he stood, towering, menacing. Not a word had been uttered, yet she knew what was to come. Madison, his mien twisted into a lecherous grin, savoured the evil moment and he slowly began to unbuckle his rawhide belt.

Guyani turned her head, she curled into a tight ball, she scrunched up inside with fear and loathing and tried to shrink away, but there was nowhere to hide. The seconds ticked away in nightmarish anticipation as frantically she searched her mind for some way of escape.

Suddenly there was a crash at the door and Marrula burst into the hut. With one fierce glance he took the scene in and with a shout jumped onto the back of the young farmer. But Madison was strong. The two lads fought and struggled while Guyani stared in horror, unable to move, unable to think. Madison grabbed Marrula in a crushing embrace and began to squeeze and squeeze – but Marrula was wild; he slammed his head into the face of his assailant and Madison stumbled, knocking the table over. The lamp fell, broke and spilled liquid flame onto the floor. The bark walls of the hut caught and flashed into a heated, blazing light. Guyani, at the last, screamed and jumped, throwing her arms about in a

flailing attempt to help her brother. Madison ignored her blows and knocked the young boy down with a heavy strike. Marrula fell to the floor and did not move.

Guyani tried to lift her brother away but Madison swung his arm around her waist and dragged her screaming from the burning paperback hut. The last thing she saw were the flames licking at Marrula's face as he lay unconscious on the pool of flaming earth floor.

Many people from the homestead, altered by the shouts and the smell of smoke, came running down to the hut. They stood together in a restless half-circle; some watching the fire, others watching the kneeling Madison, his hands limp at his sides; and the weeping young girl. Their eyes shone whit iridic fire reflected by that macabre and dancing light.

The noisome cackle of burning wood erupted suddenly into a splintered crash as Marrula tore through the rear of the hut in a blistering wail of terror and trailing flame. He escaped the inferno; stumbling through the burning wall, and in a frantic craze disappeared into the maw of that black and fateful night.

With the vivid recall of this shocking memory, old Guyani startles. She rubs her eyes; her grey tangled hair is thrown back as she stands awkwardly, resting her bony hand against the trunk of the old tree for support. She cannot see over the rise of the dune, but knows only a few steps away the sea is waiting; the cool waters folding over and over in an eternal pacific rhythm: she takes a few tottering steps that way but the glare and the heat beats her down. She recoils, submits, and is suddenly very weary. She stumbles back to sit under the tree again, stares at the grave and is soon lost once more in memory and dreaming.

The next day at Kilkenny homestead there were many questions, but Guyani remained silent – she knew no-one would believe her against a 'rich, young, white fella'. So she was sent away and went to work on another property at the bottom of the peninsula. When she arrived, nothing was said regarding the events of that night, in fact there was no open mention of her past at all. The new folk were kind but strict. They wanted a quiet girl, one who would cause no trouble. In total disregard for her name and tribe they called her 'Tilly'.

Marrula went into hiding in the bush near the camp. He was given special plants to aid the healing and bathing in seawater helped as well – but though the burnt skin hardened and scabbed, still he was left with rents and scars, testaments to that terrible night of flame and struggle.

A few days after the fire, Madison went searching for the boy. He rode to the camp near the sea but found only old women, some dogs and a few children playing in the dust. He returned two weeks later, bringing with him three bags; one of sugar, one of tea and a large sack of flour that had been secretly laced with a liberal amount of strychnine. He proffered these as gifts for Murrula; he said he was sorry, that he wanted to make amends... The old women took the sacks but would not speak of Marrula. His evil design accomplished, Madison rode back to his farm and waited.

One day, in the need of companionship and comfort, Marrula sought his people, but as he approached the camp he discerned the wailing cry of grieving women. He ran to the clearing and discovered several members of his clan laid out, dead; the flies in feast upon their closed eyes and open mouths. They had been cut down after eating the poison flour. Their deaths had been slow and terrible and when he heard the story, Muaaula's heart burned with a fire of anger and hatred that he could barely contain.

Madison told no-one of his evil deed at the camp. Used for baiting vermin traps, the poison was common enough and easily found. And in his mind he justified its use with stories he had heard of other farmers employing this trick to resolve their 'native problem'. Yet still it was many days before he gathered the courage to return to the camp. When he arrived Madison was not prepared for the scene that confronted him: for in the abandoned camp there lay many supine bodies, uncovered and baking in the hot sun. He held his kerchief to his nose and walked among the corpses searching for Marrula, but he was not to be found. The stench of guilt accompanying the undeniable evidence of his actions forced Madison to seek an immediate exculpation, so he urged his horse over the dune and to the sea beyond. There he waded into the cool aqua in an unconscionable attempt to wash away the memory of what he had seen and done.

Marrula remained hidden in the bush near the camp. Like Ulysses outside the walls of Ilium, he stalked among the acacia and stunted gum in a fierce rage, calling out to the spirits: *Grant me retribution!* He practiced with his spear with countless thrust and throws in preparation for a time of revenge. On the day of Madison's arrival at the abandoned camp, tired from his exertions, Marrula sought the shelter of a large sheoak, and there he sat to rest.

Madison had finished at the water's edge and was preparing to return to the farm. Riding further along the beach, he came to a low dune and decided to cross there and seek a track home. Fate then intervened and compelled him to ride over the dune at the very place where Marrula rested beneath the tall and shady tree.

With each plodding step as Madison's horse descended the dune the bridle jangled softly and it was this sound that alerted the resting Marrula to the unexpected arrival of his nemesis. Marrula stood slowly, watching man and horse very carefully; his hand reached down to grasp the halt of his spear, the shadow under the tree engulfed his form as though to shield his movements and somehow aid him in his quest for vengeance. Madison, looking around for a clear track to follow, was unaware of the young aboriginal until a sudden premonition made him look in the direction of the spreading sheoak. At that very moment Marrula prepared to throw, Madison reached down and with one swift action brought the rifle to his shoulder. He fired just as the spear left Marrula's hand. The slug from the gun slammed through the neck of the boy, just as the spear sank deep into the thigh of the man on the horse.

Marrula dropped like a felled tree, Madison shouted in agony, unbelieving, staring at the spear jutting from his flesh. His horse skittered and half-reared, nearly tipping him from the saddle. With a furtive glance back at the tree, Madison summoned all his will and carefully dismounted. When his injured leg hit the earth it gave way and Madison stumbled awkwardly, the end of the spear hit the ground at an angle and the shaft snapped, leaving the blade and two feet of smoke-hardened mallee still sticking out. Madison screamed and nearly lost consciousness, but he managed to drop to the ground where he sat and considered his next move. Satisfied there was no movement from under the tree, Madison grasped the stump of the spear, closed his eyes, and with one mighty pull managed to yank it from the gaping wound in his leg, and with the shock and pain of his last effort collapsed into a dead-faint and knew no more.

Mounting, however, was an exercise equating purgatory. Finally, leading the horse over to the very tree where Marrula's lifeless body lay, Madison used a low branch to help jack himself into the saddle; and with a final scornful glance at his erstwhile enemy, Madison made his way through the low-lying scrub until he found a kangaroo track that led him roughly in the direction home.

Under the old sheoak, old Guyani still asleep, dreams on; until a wind shift to the southwest sends sudden gusts of invisible menace out from over the sea. It is the wind sound that awakes her, and as she rubs the girt from her eyes she is surprised to see the figure of an old man limping toward her. As he approaches near her she chokes back a cry: *Aaiee, it is Madison!* She bends down and grabs the only weapon at hand, a rock from the cairn of the grave from her brother. Just then the wind squalls into a powerful, swirling zephyr and with manic energy the branches of the old tree whip and toss as if somehow wishing to also express feelings of great anger towards this man.

"You – it is *you!*" cries Guyani in disbelief and horror.

Madison, old and infirm reaches the old woman and sees the rock in her shaking hand.

“Wait – I came to...” But Guyani does not hear. He lurches towards her attempting to grab at the bony wrist of the old woman. But gerontic and no longer strong, he trips, falling heavily against the gnarled trunk of the old tree – and all the years and all the collective venom of Murrula’s bones slowly becoming mineral* to be taken up and transformed into stem and phyllode, bark and branch – all those passing seasons soaking up the essence and memories of the boy buried under the rocks below its spreading arch, his slowly decomposing flesh and blood and hair and teeth and rotted membranes sinking into the earth with the rain and the heat, to be sucked up by its roots, to become part of the growing, part of the core and fibres of the ancient tree – all of these, combined with eternal force of a heavenly justice that no man controls nor can understand, united into one mighty illustration of destiny’s power, manifest into a moment of revenge and reciprocation – as with a booming crack the tree lets fall a heavy branch snapped by the violent wind, and it falls, striking the old man; he drops to the ground and his head smashes against the cairn, and his life-blood splashes the rocks, and as he lays groaning he looks up one last time, looks up at the woman towering now above *him*, holding a rock in her hand, a woman wronged so many years before, and with his last breath he asks of her: “Forgive me?”

Guyani drops the rock. She is silent. Once again she cannot move. Then a voice from the grave whispers wind-song in reply: “Yes, you are forgiven.” And Madison dies.

Guyani walks to the dune. She looks back at the scene one last time; the tree, the rocks, and then wals on. She reaches the beach just as the hegira of a flaming sun sinks beneath the horizon. She keeps walking – walking toward the sun. She steps into the water, and deeper, until the sound of the wind and wave call to her no more.

Ends

*With respectful acknowledgement to Bruce Dawe.