



# Sutherland Shire **LITERARY** COMPETITION

# 2020

SUTHERLAND SHIRE





# MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

The Sutherland Shire Literary Competition aims to promote the diverse cultural heritage of the Sutherland Shire whilst contributing to the rich tradition of literary practice in Australia. It encourages and showcases the talent of our local writers and those in other states and territories, while promoting our unique Sutherland Shire to the nation.

Now in its second year, our Literary Competition and the presentation of prizes is the culmination of this vision and is our way of nurturing, promoting and celebrating literary creativity in Sutherland Shire, as well as building on the love of literature and reading fostered by our Sutherland Shire Libraries.

The journey began in 2017 with the formation of a Working Party comprising three Sutherland Shire Councillors, Tom Croucher, Michael Forshaw and Chair, Barry Collier OAM who took the competition concept to Council. The creative new idea was unanimously approved by Council which established the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition following extensive research and consultation with local writing groups, recognised writers, judges, academics and national competition organisers. The competition has been coordinated by Sutherland Shire Libraries and was a huge success in its inaugural year.

In 2020, the nationwide competition sought entries in four literary categories: traditional (rhyming) poetry, free verse poetry, short story and a new themed short story category.

The year 2020 marks the 250th anniversary of first contact between the Gweagal Clan and the crew of the *Endeavour* ship on the southern shores of Kamay Botany Bay in 1770, an area now known as Kurnell in the Sutherland Shire Local Government Area. To acknowledge this historic event and reflect on all perspectives of our shared history with truth and with respect, this new category was added and themed *2020: Looking Back, Moving Forward*.

Attractive prize money was offered in each category thanks to the generous sponsorship of Tradies, Moran Aged Care, the University of Wollongong, Club Central Menai and the NSW Government. To encourage entries from local writers a Shire Resident's Prize was again made available in each of the three competition categories.

Council was fortunate to secure the services of experienced judges: well-known, national award-winning poet, David Campbell and award-winning writer and Professor of Writing at UTS, John Dale. I would like to thank this year's judges for the hours spent considering hundreds of entries and for their valued expert commentary.

In 2020 the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition attracted submissions from almost every State and Territory in Australia. A total of 400 entries were received: 217 in the poetry sections and 183 in the short story section. Significantly, and confirming the perceived need to acknowledge local literary talent, 27% of entries were submitted by residents of the Sutherland Shire.

I thank members of Council's Working Party and Council's Library staff for their hard work in bringing the Competition to life. Finally, I congratulate the prize-winners and thank the many entrants from across Australia for their contribution in continuing the success of our Sutherland Shire Literary Competition.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message from the Mayor	2
List of Winners	5

TRADITIONAL VERSE		
1st Prize	<b>A Precious Chance</b> Shelley Hansen, Maryborough QLD	6
2nd Prize	<b>Ghost Child</b> Brenda-Joy Pritchard, Charters Towers QLD	8
3rd Prize	<b>From Gallipoli With Love</b> Tom McIlveen, Port Macquarie NSW	10
FREE VERSE		
1st Prize	<b>Botany Bay</b> Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW	12
2nd Prize	<b>Still the Rain Kept Falling</b> Denise O'Haga, Northbridge NSW	14
3rd Prize	<b>East Coast Blues</b> Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW	16
Shire Resident's Prize	<b>I am Australia</b> Tiarne Szemenyei, Gymea NSW	18
SHORT STORIES		
1st Prize	<b>Jeff and Jill</b> Rachel Flynn, Fitzroy North VIC	20
2nd Prize	<b>Motel</b> Beverly Lello, Yackandandah VIC	24
3rd Prize	<b>Bleeding</b> Anthea Fraser Gupta, Fairy Meadow NSW	28
Shire Resident's Prize	<b>The Bay</b> Kate Herring, Oyster Bay NSW	32
THEMED SHORT STORIES		
1st Prize	<b>29th April 1770</b> Leone McManus, Como NSW	34
2nd Prize	<b>Old School</b> Claire Riley, Bangor NSW	38
3rd Prize	<b>Clay</b> John Scholz, Willunga SA	42
Sponsors		46

Sutherland Shire Literary Competition Publication

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# LIST OF WINNERS

## TRADITIONAL VERSE

Prize Winners	
First Prize	<b>A Precious Chance</b> - Shelley Hansen, Maryborough QLD
Second Prize	<b>Ghost Child</b> - Brenda-Joy Pritchard, Charters Towers QLD
Third Prize	<b>From Gallipoli With Love</b> - Tom McIlveen, Port Macquarie NSW
Highly Commended	
Commended	<b>Old Man Drought</b> - Tom McIlveen, Port Macquarie NSW
Commended	<b>Bushfire (The Dragon from the West)</b> - Kay Gorring, Morayfield QLD
Commended	<b>To Trash the Terrors</b> - Robyn Sykes, Binalong NSW

## FREE VERSE

Prize Winners	
First Prize	<b>Botany Bay</b> - Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW
Second Prize	<b>Still the Rain Kept Falling</b> - Denise O'Hagan, Northbridge NSW
Third Prize	<b>East Coast Blues</b> - Penny Lane, Nelson Bay NSW
Shire Resident's Prize	<b>I am Australia</b> - Tiarne Szemenyei, Gymea NSW
Highly Commended	
Commended	<b>I will never hurt you again</b> - Damen O'Brien, Wynnum QLD
Commended	<b>Where Once She Danced</b> - Anne Casey, Northbridge NSW
Commended	<b>Love You to Death</b> - David Terelinck, Biggera Waters QLD

## SHORT STORIES

Prize Winners	
First Prize	<b>Jeff and Jill</b> - Rachel Flynn, Fitzroy North VIC
Second Prize	<b>Motel</b> - Beverly Lello, Yackandandah VIC
Third Prize	<b>Bleeding</b> - Anthea Fraser Gupta, Fairy Meadow NSW
Shire Resident's Prize	<b>The Bay</b> - Kate Herring, Oyster Bay NSW
Highly Commended	
Commended	<b>Catching Crabs</b> - Yihong Gao, Campbelltown NSW
Commended	<b>The Stars, Millie</b> - Helen Meany, Stanmore NSW
Commended	<b>Traumerei</b> - Paulette Gittins, South Yarra VIC
Commended	<b>Educating Radwa</b> - Alice Mantel, Concord West NSW

## THEMED SHORT STORIES

Prize Winners	
First Prize	<b>29th April 1770</b> - Leone McManus, Como NSW
Second Prize	<b>Old School</b> - Claire Riley, Bangor NSW
Third Prize	<b>Clay</b> - John Scholz, Willunga SA
Highly Commended	
Commended	<b>The 987</b> - Tylissa Elisara, Mount Peter QLD
Commended	<b>Our Destiny</b> - Marie Clear, Wagga Wagga NSW

## TRADITIONAL VERSE



# A PRECIOUS CHANCE

**Shelley Hansen**

Maryborough QLD

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*It's always gratifying to see well-written traditional verse that tackles a topical issue in a thought-provoking manner, and that's certainly the case with this poem. The metre and rhyme are consistent throughout and the lines flow smoothly, even with the added complication of an internal rhyme. It's a discussion about cyber-bullying, questioning how and why the rise of the internet has led to so much online abuse with, in some cases, tragic consequences. As the author warns: "There is no way to recapture hasty words that we release, and such words, once harshly spoken, can destroy a heart that's broken/just as surely as a dagger thrust can cause a life to cease." So, unless we set the right example, we will lose "a precious chance". Read this poem for its message, but also to appreciate the very best of technical skill in the writing of rhyming verse.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*I am extremely honoured to accept this prestigious award for an art form very dear to my heart. To receive such recognition in two consecutive years is both a surprise and an immense delight. It is a privilege to be able to use traditional rhyming verse to highlight the social issues of our time, and cyber-bullying is certainly at the forefront of these. Our youth in particular deserve our full support as they battle with this dark threat to their personal safety. Competitions such as this afford writers the opportunity to expose our work to a wider audience, which is very much appreciated. Sincere thanks to Sutherland Shire, the judges and competition organisers for their support.*

From the outback to the city, swept a wave of grief and pity  
when we heard the tragic news that yet another life was lost  
in the prime of springtime season – and it seemed beyond  
all reason  
that the future of a child should seem too bleak to face the  
cost.  
Then we gained the information that brought rage and  
consternation  
when we learned the cause of suicide was cyber-bully  
threat.  
Though its venom is untruthful, to our kids so fresh and  
youthful  
it presents an anguished challenge that at times cannot be  
met.

So we stopped at last, and listened – and our tears of anger  
glistened  
as we came to understand how many children are involved.  
Then committees formed for talking, but they found that  
they were baulking  
as they struggled with the strategies to get this problem  
solved.  
Is the issue with our schooling? Should we try to make a  
ruling  
to enforce a change by punishment for those who may  
transgress?  
Can we pass some legislation that requires co-operation?  
Should we drag these perpetrators to the limelight to  
confess?

What has caused this strange obsession with unbridled rank  
aggression?  
We have always had our bullies, but the plague's become a  
curse.  
Now antagonists are faceless, and their accusations  
baseless,  
yet designed to generate a tide of ridicule – and worse.  
Are we satisfied with blaming social media, in flaming  
indignation that these posts are not deleted, stopped or  
blocked?  
Can it be that we're ignoring reasons firmly underscoring  
what the issue really is? If we were told, would we be  
shocked?

In my mind an ancient saying seems to often  
keep replaying –  
that a workman, poorly trained, will always  
castigate his tools,  
so our tendency of railing at the internet for  
failing  
us, might have the same effect – and even make  
us look like fools.  
For the cause is so much deeper, the descent of  
conduct steeper  
than the rise of cyber-space, which is a platform,  
nothing more.  
When did manners start to falter? When did  
values start to alter?  
When did people cease respecting rights of  
others – rich or poor?

We have built this land together, and it doesn't  
matter whether  
we inhabit open space or we have walked the  
coastal rim.  
For our "mateship" should be binding and  
uplifting when we're finding  
that a helping hand is offered during times when  
things are grim.  
But that way of life is shrinking. Have we  
stopped and done some thinking  
that we hold a deadly weapon of destruction in  
our hand?  
It's reflected in our choices and the way we use  
our voices.  
This is how we've been brought up. Do we no  
longer understand?

Once we tempered speech with manners and  
avoided waving banners,  
and we often kept opinions to ourselves, lest we  
offend.  
Now we have a strong compulsion that has  
overcome revulsion  
to declare our thoughts aloud, online, insistent to  
the end.  
But with many paths to travel, life can easily  
unravel

if we use our words to turn a reputation into dust.  
We may rightly speak with candour – but the  
tentacles of slander  
can untie the bonds of friendship and can break  
the hand of trust.

We might think we'd rather perish than give up  
the things we cherish  
like the right to our opinions, and the freedom of  
our speech;  
but with right comes obligation, and the fabric of  
our nation  
has been woven with "fair dinkum" in the values  
that we teach.  
We must think before we utter speech belonging  
in the gutter.  
There is no way to recapture hasty words that we  
release,  
and such words, once harshly spoken, can  
destroy a heart that's broken  
just as surely as a dagger thrust can cause a life  
to cease.

So let's set the right example, let our conduct be  
a sample  
showing how we treat our mates is how we hope  
that they'll repay.  
Practise bullying no longer. Prove that being  
kind is stronger,  
and perhaps our kids will follow us, to seek a  
better way.  
If we choose to be uncaring, then we'll have to  
be preparing  
for the tide of youthful suicide to steadily  
advance.  
Then the nation will be weeping, and the guilt  
will haunt our sleeping  
as we blame ourselves forever that we lost a  
precious chance.

## TRADITIONAL VERSE



# GHOST CHILD

Brenda-Joy Pritchard

Charters Towers QLD

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*This is a confronting, controversial poem that deals with a highly emotional, intensely personal issue in carefully-structured traditional verse. The subject is abortion, approached from the perspective of the 'ghost child' who was lost when 'Society' imposed its moral will. We can only guess at the precise circumstances as it has been a story told, in many different versions, all too often over the years. The possible consequences of such societal pressure are made abundantly clear as the writer takes us deep into the life of the mother as, over time, and despite the birth of grandchildren, she mourns her 'first forsaken one'. Again we see how rhyming verse, in skilled hands, can challenge us to pause and think about the fragility of life as it exposes the trauma that can be hidden behind the intangible walls that society builds.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*Although only in its second year, already the Sutherland Shire Literary Award has become one of the most prestigious competitive outlets for Australian rhyming verse.*

*It is a delight to again be among the award recipients and I sincerely thank all who have organised, sponsored or contributed in any way towards this outstanding competition. May it continue for many years to come.*

I was warm within the confines of the sharing of our lives  
as the rhythm of our heartbeats intertwined  
for dependency on nurture's how a waiting soul survives  
ever turning,  
ever yearning,  
just as nature has designed.

But I felt the scalpelled traumas – too invasive to forget –  
with the promise of my future torn aside  
while you suffered the bombardment of immediate regret  
ever seeping,  
ever weeping,  
anguished screaming as I died.

I have watched you moving onwards past the shattering of grief;  
I have seen the healthy children that you bore,  
yet I knew that my replacements could not conjure your relief  
ever surging,  
ever urging,  
ever wanting something more.

In the background of your mothering, that constant, nagging need  
hurling shadows on your moments in the sun.  
Festered scarring from your hidden wound still causing you to bleed  
ever staining,  
ever paining  
for your first forsaken one.

Rooted fragments from another world spread tentacles like weeds  
that have wrapped around your heart's protective shell,  
wedged in cracks between the pavement of the daily routine needs  
ever breaking,  
ever aching  
from the secrets you won't tell.

Throughout seasons of your life-phase I have watched your hair turn white  
while, despite the birth of grandchildren, you pine,  
in the labyrinth of thoughts that stalk the blanket dark of night  
ever shaking,  
ever waking  
when remembrance chills your spine.

When it came to my abortion, you were pressed to make that choice  
when 'Society' imposed its moral will.  
So you lost the right to listen to your own internal voice  
ever sounding,  
ever pounding –  
and the outcome haunts you still.

I was never manifest, I only live within your heart  
and there's no one else who knows that I am there.  
From the moment that I joined you, we could never be apart,  
ever sobbing,  
ever robbing,  
ever forcing you to care.

Oh, they didn't give you warning of the pain you would go through – for a  
mother's love is forged within the womb.  
What we might have been together is an innate part of you  
ever casting,  
ever-lasting –  
epitaph upon a tomb.

## TRADITIONAL VERSE



# FROM GALLIPOLI WITH LOVE

**Tom McIlveen**

Port Macquarie NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*Here we have a poem that harks back, in a more stereotypically traditional fashion, to the Gallipoli campaign as a son writes to his father about some of the horrors that he encounters on a daily basis. The writer has clearly researched the detail of that catastrophic defeat and, with meticulous attention to metre and rhyme, manages to convey a chilling sense of both time and place: "What a God forsaken bloody mess! It is hard to verbalise/and explain the dreadful things we've seen and done/... for the trenches here are swarming with mosquitoes, rats and flies/from the corpses that lie rotting in the sun."*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*The poem, 'FROM GALLIPOLI WITH LOVE' ...was inspired by the poem ...'SARI BAIR', written by well known traditional Australian poet C.J. Dennis. I had been studying his poem for some time and had learnt to recite it verbatim for an upcoming Performance Poetry Competition. This inspired me to start reading up on line Australia's part in the Gallipoli campaign, and I subsequently found copies of some old letters on line, written by soldiers to loved ones back home. One in particular, told of a son writing home to his family, marked attention to his father at work, with two letters enclosed. (One for his Dad and the other for his mother and sisters, obviously to shield them from the horrors of what he was truly going through.) It has been said... that in the filthy, putrid trenches of Gallipoli, the true spirit of the 'Aussie Digger' and the ANZAC was forged, and the unique culture of Aussie mateship emerged, as the newly fledged colonials first got to walk on the world stage to earn the respect of, not only their allied peers, but also the enemy with whom they were fighting. It was to be the ANZAC legacy left to us, which we hold so dearly in honour and respect today.*

I am sending this and hoping Dad, that the girls don't get to see what is truly going on behind the scenes. I would rather them believing God is here protecting me- than to know that we were blown to smithereens.

We were confident of victory and were spoiling for a fight, as the Ninth and Tenth Battalions paved the way... the Eleventh copped a hiding though, in spite of all their might, when they disembarked just north of Suvla Bay.

We were sure the Turks would turn and run from the mighty Third Brigade and that we could take the Dardanelles with ease. But apparently they'd seen behind our fearsome masquerade, and refused to yield or bow on bended knees.

I was with the second wave of troops that had scrambled two abreast from the rowing boats the tugs had towed ashore. We had landed in the middle of a flamin' hornets' nest- in a blazing hell of blood and guts and gore!

There were bodies strewn like bits of wood all along the stony beach, where the withered kelp lay stranded, rank and dried. There were others floating shoreward through the shallows out of reach, as they drifted in like flotsam on the tide.

If we'd only taken Chanuk Bair, in that very first advance, then the sacrifice may not have been in vain. If the landing hadn't gone amiss, we may have stood a chance of achieving something from this whole campaign.

We have bitten off a little more than we'll ever get to chew, and have opened up a can of worms it seems. For the Turks are worthy warriors, and jingoistic too... but misguided by the Kaiser's crazy dreams.

They're persistent little buggers though, I have got to give them that... for they like to do their fighting tete -a-tete. They've been culling us like rabbits, in a game of tit for tat- and can give about as good as what they get!

We have names for every mountain top and for every cliff and ledge, and for every gully, gorge and hidden trek. There is Baby Seven Hundred, Walker's Ridge and Razor's Edge... and of course you would have heard about the Nek!

It was where the Third Light Horse Brigade were deprived of half their men in a suicidal bayonet attack. They were slaughtered there like cattle in a butcher's holding pen, till the Brass had inter-vened and called them back.

We have called it Godley's abattoir, as it's tainted with the blood of the hundreds who have died to no avail- for a lousy bit of wilderness and acreage of crud, with a spattering of broken rock and shale.

When I look around, I wonder now... why I volunteered for this, when I could have been at home in Inverell. I would just as soon be playing cards with Mum and Little Sis, as be playing devil's advocate in hell.

It's the Sydney blokes who do it tough, in the scorching midday heat... as they've never had to rough it in the scrub. They would rather be at Bondi, chasin' sheilas down the street, or be sipping grog in some suburban pub.

But they're eager in a donnybrook, when the chips are really down, and are partial to a bit of fuss and strife. They have learnt the art of fighting on the streets of Sydney Town, and are handy with a bayonet and knife.

They are generous with cigarettes, and have taught us how to smoke, and are full of wit and clever repartee. They are always stirring mischief and they love to share a joke, and have been a calming influence on me.

We've been fighting here since April Dad, with our backs against the wall, and our senses numbed by nauseating stink. I suppose I should be grateful that I'm even here at all- I'm alive and breathing oxygen...(I think!)

What a God forsaken, bloody mess! It is hard to verbalise and explain the dreadful things we've seen and done... for the trenches here are swarming with mosquitoes, rats and flies from the corpses that lie rotting in the sun.

If you think the flies at home are bad, you should see them over here! They're as thick as ours, but not as purely bred. They will hang around till evening and then seem to disappear, when the mozzies come and hassle us instead.

It's the smell that's driving me insane, and the thirst I cannot slake... from the putrid taste of ruin and decay. It's the overwhelming pungency in every breath I take, and the thought of you and Mum so far away.

I am signing off and hoping Dad, that the girls don't make a fuss, when they get to hear there's nothing much to tell. I would rather have them thinking God is here protecting us- than to know that we've been damned and sent to hell.

## FREE VERSE



# BOTANY BAY

**Penny Lane**  
Nelson Bay NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*"It began..." and with those two simple words the writer opens each stanza of this evocative poem as he or she takes us to that day in 1770 when Cook's Endeavour approached the shores of Australia: "it began with white-winged bellying/of the ocean's swell and thrust/to anchor grab this peopled/fire smoked land;" Those few lines give some indication of the poet's ability to choose word combinations that provide several vivid images in a concise, concentrated manner, creating overall a pervasive atmosphere of haunting melancholy. There are no wasted lines as we are immersed in that beginning and its consequences for the first peoples in terms of what they lost as the newcomers took over their land: "it began here/where winding concrete paths/conceal the barefoot tracks/of several thousand years;"*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*Thank you to all involved in the Sutherland Shire literary competition for your support of those of us who write poetry. I am thrilled to have won this award, particularly as I was inspired to write this poem when I visited the shire's Kurnell. It's a special place which aroused in me profound feelings of what the arrival there of Europeans meant for the original inhabitants of this land.*

It began  
here in this commonplace  
of bay rim beach and remnant bush  
on a salt breezed, blue domed day;

it began with maybe cloud strange  
watched by men in bark canoes  
and women swan-egg scooping  
in this stingrayed cove;

it began where now a raven  
stills in wild grass and stares,  
its black-feather flickerings  
signalling unease;

it began with white-winged bellying  
of the ocean's swell and thrust  
to anchor grab this peopled,  
fire smoked land;

it began with plunge of booted feet  
from boat to near shore shallows,  
where today the pitted rocks  
recall the bootprints;

it began with bursts of startled birds  
and quiverings in the canopy  
where now the raven perches,  
watching yet;

it began with musket shots,  
harsh volleys  
like the raven's aa-aa-aa-aa  
at intrusive feet below its branch;

it began with booted, rifled trawling  
through the *terra nullius* huts,  
huts the *nullius* people fled,  
musket wary for their children;

it began with greedy thievings  
of fishing spears, forty so, or fifty,  
all that could be found,  
and leavings of unwanted beads;

it began here  
where winding concrete paths  
conceal the barefoot tracks  
of several thousand years;

it began  
where the now gone raven's  
breeze adrift once-feathering falls,  
settling lightly on the sand;

it began.

## FREE VERSE



# STILL THE RAIN KEPT FALLING

Denise O'Hagan  
Northbridge NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

Scene: a funeral. Deceased: the writer's mother. It is a familiar setting to most of us when we farewell a loved one and the memories of a life, both happy and sad, dominate our emotions. The "sombre shuffle in" and "Murmured condolences/ Which cannot help but miss the mark/ But it's all we have: Inadequacy on a pedestal." And yet that is neatly set against the pragmatism of the mother, who is still a presence as she chuckles "Oh, get on with it!" and lights another cigarette. The poet skillfully weaves the present and the past through the memorial service and on to the "grave-studded hillside" where the brilliant imagery of "a thousand-piece chess set" is used as a backdrop to the burial.

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

I am deeply honoured that my poem 'Still the rain kept falling' has achieved recognition in the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition 2020. As it is about my mother's funeral, it cannot help but be an intensely personal poem, but it's also about the limitations of language at moments of extreme grief, and the power of age-old rituals in which we take emotional shelter. I am gratified if my poem moves beyond being an expression of personal grief and touches a universal chord, and is able to affect those who never knew her. Heartfelt thanks to the judges and everyone else involved in the gathering and sifting of entries, which is a huge job, and I look forward to reading all the poetry!

I'll not forget  
The sombre shuffle in  
From the rain, the pain of it  
Of nods and handshakes  
Murmured condolences  
Which cannot help but miss the mark  
But it's all we have:  
Inadequacy on a pedestal.

*Oh, get on with it! She'd chuckle  
Cross her legs and light another cigarette.*

And so we did,  
With the inevitable mini rituals  
Attendant on the outward one:  
The squeak of shoes on stone  
And clearing of throats, misting of eyes  
At the wavering brush of candlelight  
And spray of lilies over her.

*The moment's happened, then, she'd say  
The one we shrink from, and push away until we can't.*

Yet there's no end  
To what we can't admit  
As later anecdote and wishful thinking shape our memory  
And, chameleon-like, it changes in the telling.  
But this much I know:  
Her dark-haired grandson who sat apart  
Inclined, black-shirted, at the piano,  
His fingers dancing a song of his own making  
Tenderly, as if he'd spent his short life  
In preparation of this moment  
Under the thirteenth Station of the Cross.

*She adored her music  
From Bach and Billie Joel to Casablanca's theme ...*

She was a good listener.  
But now it was our turn  
To hang onto words, to incantations  
Expressing the inexpressible.  
I clutched my tissues, hot and damp  
And still the rain kept falling.

*In her letters, notes and diaries – a litany of ruminations  
Words had stretched her past her troubles, far beyond ...*

And now she is the beyond.  
The black bug of the waiting hearse was shiny  
Doors open, mouthing glassily in the pale air  
Reflection-laden, gleaming  
As holy water splashed  
Like slivered tears  
On wood.

*Contrary, contemplative, and one of a kind  
Mistress of the mercurial: my mother.*

The grave-studded hillside  
Stretched, like a thousand-piece chess-set  
With exhausted pawns, falling  
And tilting Kings and Queens  
Watching, as she disappeared  
Under scoop after scoop of earth  
The richer now for holding her.

## FREE VERSE



# EAST COAST BLUES

**Penny Lane**  
Nelson Bay NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*Here, in a broader echo of "Botany Bay", we have what might be referred to, rather flippantly perhaps, as a brief history of Australia. The poet uses an undercurrent of musical references to explore the passing of millennia, from "The sonorous bass of ocean swell on sandy shore..." and the development of the earliest organisms through the "wave on wave on syncopated wave" of "rafts" of human arrivals to the modern detritus of plastic bottles and bags, the "remnant life of human progress," and the consequent "...interrupted rhythm of the ocean,/the overheating turbulence,/the moaning." This is the story, in microcosm, of the impact that humankind has had on the planet, cleverly captured in a series of vividly precise images.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*The pleasure for me in writing poetry is in the actual writing, rather than in some outside affirmation of my poems. I occasionally enter a competition as a means of getting feedback on how my poetry is going. I so enjoyed last year's Sutherland Shire competition presentation night that I decided to enter again as a way to support the competition organisers. I certainly didn't expect to win two awards again. My heartfelt thanks to all involved in running this wonderful competition.*

The sonorous bass  
of ocean swell on sandy shore,  
on sand, the slithering back of bubbled sea  
abandoning blue slick,  
wet shimmering of sky on sand from wave on wave  
and there among the glittering,  
tidal bringings: vacated shells and seagrass strandings,  
sponges, corals, cuttlefish,  
the constant seashore littering;

firstly flung, those early living organisms  
once harboured by the ancient deep, released on sand,  
some to fossilise in rocks,  
others, over eons, eons, eons,  
to evolve into complexities of animals and plants,

and still, and on and on, in wave on wave on wave refrain,  
carried in from distances, more cast-offs of the ocean,  
drifts of seeds from lands,  
wave on wave of captured world thrown hastily  
before the slinking back;

the first of us, canoes of humans, rafts of us,  
and far, far later on, on wave on wave on syncopated wave,  
seekers of *new* lands, and cast on shore  
whole rasping ships of us: discards of white society,  
reprobates and convicts, watching from unwanted coast the  
cadence of the waves,  
the hopeless suck of somewhere else;

more, more,  
more ocean flings of us:  
wanderers after new adventures,  
waves of hopeful immigrants, escapees from fear and poverty;  
improvising riffs of us, an optimistic harmony, a rippling of discordant notes;  
and still the ocean's work's not done,  
not done,

for yet the waves,  
the waves on waves on warming waves,  
spit up their bringings: plastic bottles, plastic bags,  
plastic caps, cups, wrappers, straws; the swirling waste  
on rising waves, an eddying plastic diaspora, the remnant life of human *progress*,

a turtle, dead,  
a blue-ringed strangled seabird,  
a sea-snake far further south of where it used to be,  
the interrupted rhythm of the ocean,  
the overheating turbulence,  
the moaning.

## FREE VERSE



# I AM AUSTRALIA

Tiarne Szemenyei

GyMEA NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*This poem also celebrates Australia's history, taking as its structural basis elements such as land, water, air, heat, and so on. Again, through a series of subtly-drawn word-pictures, we are witness to successive human arrivals and the different interactions between man and nature, both harmonious and destructive. There are the "Life-fires to heat, cook, celebrate;" but also "The stillness following/the fight." and "...a new kind of death,/running the streams clean./Death of difference." This is our home in all its huge variety as we try to coexist while it remains, watching "As billions of stories roll over and over/Like hills on the horizon,/Blurring into one at the end."*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*I was honoured and delighted to receive this award. Through my writing, I sought to remind people of the longevity of the land on which we live, and how it contributes to our shared history as Australians. Thank you to all the organisers, supporters and judges for providing Australian writers with an opportunity to showcase their works.*

I am land.

My spirit lies

With the smallest sand-grain,

The tallest blue-gum.

I am the people that have been

That are

That will be.

Generations connected by

Dust and soil and roots.

I am water.

Blue-veined life.

Eternal ripples that flow and

Flow and flow.

Man comes on water's back,

Drinks the drops through greedy lips

That steal the land away.

But water is clean,

Rinses the dark times free.

The two streams become one.

I am air.

Drawn in and out and

In and out.

Thick in the tension, thin in the peace.

Sea-breeze brought man.

Man choked it,

Thick hands squeezed tight.

Now, the air is thinning,

Dispersing like a cloud after

The storm.

I am heat.

Sun-rays falling to the green earth.

Life-fires to heat, cook, celebrate;

Death-fires to turn the days black.

Trees, men, hearts burnt barren

Under a red sun.

Now, the heat is respect, kinship, love.

The warmth that travels between two bodies

During an embrace.

I am sound.

A heartbeat of energy,

A whispered song; where the flower dances

With the rain and the wolf

Plays a symphony for the moon.

The song of a people

Defending their land.

A choir,

Voices then and now become one.

I am death.

The stillness following

The fight.

Hearts flicker out, bodies lay,

Upturned on the red earth.

Their blood turns the stream-veins

Crimson.

Now, there is a new kind of death,

Running the streams clean.

Death of difference.

I am home.

The earthworm crawls blindly,

A life of darkness,

But he is not afraid.

He is home.

Man fights land with sea,

To live on me,

Or with me.

I am home,

To both.

I am time.

I have seen a world

Of white, green, brown, grey.

Saplings, become forests; enemies,

become friends.

Wars fought for land

That belongs to no one.

But it is still me, watching

As billions of stories roll over and over

Like hills on the horizon,

Blurring into one at the end.

## SHORT STORIES



# JEFF AND JILL

**Rachel Flynn**  
Fitzroy North VIC

May

When the doorbell rang that Friday evening, they were all sitting on the couch in front of the telly. Jeff was watching the soccer, Jill was reading *Home Beautiful* and Gracie was writing a letter on lined paper with a purple biro.

Jill looked at Gracie and said, 'Are you expecting anyone?'

She looked up, alarmed, 'No,' then hopeful, 'Maybe.'

Jeff switched from the soccer to the footy.

Gracie went to answer the door and came back with a boyfriend. Her parents looked at him – working boots, worn jeans, check shirt, rough hands. He moved his weight from one foot to the other till Gracie sat him on the couch at the end away from her father.

'This is my dad,' said Gracie, 'and my mum – Jeff and Jill – Jill 'n Jeff.'

'Giddy,' said the boyfriend. 'Sean.' He held his hand out to Jeff.

Jeff shook his hand and nodded a greeting.

'Have you had your dinner?' asked Jill.

'Got a feed at a servo,' said Sean.

'I'll just get ready,' said Gracie, and she abandoned Sean to her parents and disappeared down the hall.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Jill.

'Wouldn't mind,' said Sean.

Jill went to put the kettle on while Sean and Jeff sat at each end of the couch and watched the footy. North was playing Richmond.

'Do you follow the footy?' asked Jeff.

'Yep,' said Sean.

'Who do you follow?'

'North,' said Sean, and he leaned a little closer to the screen to see an exciting bit of play.

Jill called from the kitchen, 'How do you have your tea?'

'Black thanks,' said Sean, and he sat back into the corner of the couch with the cushion comfortably supporting his back.

Jill came in with his tea in a blue mug and put another on the table beside Jeff. She offered them both an iced vovo from a floral plate. Then she sat to the side on an uncomfortable timber chair with her tea in a green mug. The television flashed in the corner of the room. The frantic commentator drew their attention.

'Did you see that?' said Jeff.

'Yep,' said Sean.

Jeff gulped his tea while Jill sipped hers.

An ad came on and Jeff turned to Sean.

'What do you drive?' he said.

'Holden panel van, V8, resprayed Foster's blue.'

'Blue's nice,' said Jill. 'Where do you work?'

Before he could answer, Gracie came back. She was dressed in blue and brown with red shoes. Her hair had been arranged in a pile and secured with numerous silver clips. She had a touch of kohl across her eyelids and a smear of gloss on her lips. Then she took the newspaper off the couch and sat in the middle between her boyfriend and her father.

'I'm ready,' she said. 'Where shall we go?'

'I'd just as soon stay here and watch the footy,' said Sean.

They all laughed as if it wasn't true. Then Gracie and Sean left to go and visit friends, or maybe go to a bar, but probably just to drive around. The parents heard the rumble of his V8 out on the street.

'Do you think he's all right?' asked Jill.

'He follows the footy,' said Jeff.

'But he drives a panel van,' said Jill.

August

Gracie got up late one Saturday morning and announced that she would need a bigger bed. Jeff almost said *what for*, but then didn't.

When Gracie got out of the shower she poured herself a serve of cereal and milk, and then turned to the bedroom furniture section in the *Trading Post*. As her finger went down the column, the spoon went in and out of her mouth, and water dripped from her hair onto

the chair, the table, the paper and down her neck. Jill sipped tea and read the front of *The Age*. Jeff ate crumpets and read the sport section.

'This one will do,' said Gracie. 'Art deco, double bed, one hundred dollars. I'll phone them, after I'm dressed.'

She disappeared down the hall. Jeff looked at Jill.

'She wants a double bed,' he said.

Jill nodded. 'She's big now.'

'But is she big enough?' asked Jeff.

Gracie came back dressed, picked up the phone and dialled the number.

'Hello. I'm ringing about the bed.... Is it in good condition? ... And the mattress.... Yeah ... no, it sounds fine. Can I come and see it? ... This afternoon? ... Yep.... All right.... See ya.'

Gracie hung up and turned to her parents. 'So, does someone want to come with me to look at the bed?'

That afternoon, Gracie and Jill turned into a leafy street and found the apartment up a flight of terrazzo steps. A pregnant young wife opened the door and showed them into the second bedroom. The bed was beautifully made up with ironed white sheets and an embroidered quilt. Gracie wanted it even more.

'It's lovely, I'll have it,' she said.

'Would you like the bedside table as well,' said the pregnant wife. 'We need the room for the baby.'

The husband came in and wrapped his arms around his wife. 'The bedside table doesn't really go with it,' he said. 'I just stained it to look the same. You can have it for another twenty dollars.' He ran his right hand over her baby bump.

'Fine,' said Gracie. 'Can I pay fift now, and the rest when I pick it up?'

That evening, they all drove back in the Volvo. When they got to the top of the terrazzo steps, they found the bed in pieces on the porch. It didn't look quite the same. It was leaning against the brick wall - two wooden bed-ends, two iron rails, a slat base and a yellow mattress.

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*A witty yet heartfelt story of an older suburban couple and their daughter Gracie who decides to move into a share house with her boyfriend. Sharp dialogue and understated prose make these characters come alive as the couple move on to the next stage of life while contemplating the stuff their daughter has left behind.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*Writing is a solitary occupation. There can be quite a distance, time and location, between the writer and the reader, unknown to each other.*

*The story acts as a bridge, connecting people with shared experiences.*

*In this story, Jeff and Jill are at that point when their youngest child suddenly grows up and leaves home. What are they going to do then?*



(cont.)  
**JEFF AND JILL**

**Rachel Flynn**  
Fitzroy North VIC

‘It’ll be all right,’ Jill said, ‘and it only cost a hundred dollars.’

Jeff carried one bed-end down the stairs, while Gracie knocked on the door. The young husband opened it.

‘We’ve come for the bed,’ said Gracie, ‘and the bedside table.’ She handed him a fifty and a twenty.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘It’s enough for a cot for the baby.’

His wife appeared behind him. ‘And some bunny rugs,’ she said.

They smiled at each other as if they had a secret.

Jeff came back up the stairs and took the other bed-end. The young husband brought the bedside table out and carried it down the stairs. Jill and Gracie carried the slat base down, then went back for the mattress. The wife was standing in the doorway with the light behind her.

‘It’s a good bed,’ she said to Gracie.

Jeff came back for the two iron railings.

Jill and Gracie helped Jeff load the dismantled bed onto the roof rack. Then they watched while he tied everything down. He liked to use great lengths of rope and particular sorts of knots, perhaps reef knots and clove hitches.

When they arrived home, they carried all the pieces into the house, and re-assembled the bed in Gracie’s room. Then she went to the linen cupboard and chose the best white cotton sheets and the finest pair of pillowcases, took them into her room and made the bed. Her old small bed was left in pieces in the hall, ready for the shed.

Presently the doorbell rang. Sean had arrived.

‘Giddy,’ he said, and handed a large parcel to Gracie. She opened it and found a lovely big doona, filled with wool. Gracie and Sean disappeared into the bedroom, and the parents were left with each other. Jill picked up her knitting and Jeff turned the telly on to watch the footy.

November

On this Saturday morning Jeff and Jill were busy with domestic duties involving spray-on cleaning products. When Gracie emerged from her room they paused to admire her outfit.

She was wearing an expensive knitted top and a cheap black skirt. Due to her strict budget, she had been to the op shop and bought some gold shoes and an almost matching clutch. Sean’s clothes were hanging in her wardrobe. There was a pair of brown trousers and a white shirt with narrow brown stripes.

‘He should be here any minute,’ said Gracie, ‘Did I tell you I’m shifting out tomorrow?’

Her parents looked at each other.

‘Where to?’ asked Jill.

‘What for?’ asked Jeff.

‘St. Kilda,’ said Gracie. ‘I answered an ad for a share house. Then I had an interview, and a second interview.’

‘Goodness,’ said Jill, ‘a second interview.’

‘I’ll have to pay seventy dollars a week for rent and a share of the bills. Can you help shift my bed and stuff tomorrow? There’s already furniture in the rest of the house.’

That’s when the doorbell rang, and Gracie went to let Sean in. Her parents were left standing in the kitchen with their cleaning products in their hands.

‘What does she want to shift out for?’ asked Jeff.

‘She’s grown up,’ said Jill.

Presently Gracie and Sean appeared, dressed to go to a wedding. She had added a green plastic necklace to her outfit and he had cleaned his boots and put on his father’s wide paisley tie from the seventies.

‘Whose wedding is it?’ asked Jill.

‘A school mate,’ said Sean. ‘Toasty’

‘Is he old enough to get married?’ asked Jeff.

‘Yep,’ said Sean.

Jill took a photograph of them, as she didn’t often see them dressed so nicely. Then they left, and the parents stayed in the kitchen and listened to the V8 roar down the street.

‘She never paid seventy dollars a week to live here,’ said Jeff.

‘No,’ said Jill.

‘It’ll be quiet without her,’ said Jeff. He looked at the floor.

The next day Gracie packed half of her belongings into boxes and bags. Jeff and Sean dismantled her bed and loaded it onto the roof rack of the Volvo. Then they put the table and the chest of drawers and bags and boxes into the back of the V8 and drove in convoy to the share house in St Kilda.

Jeff and Sean carried the pieces of bed into the house and put them back together. Then they went back for the table and the chest. Jill and Gracie carried the boxes and bags in and piled them on the floor.

Then Gracie showed them around the house. They looked at the cracked windowpanes and uneven floorboards, the dripping taps and drooping woodwork, the gloomy corridor and closed doors where other housemates may have been. Jeff was going to make a comment, but then didn’t. Jill noticed the orange and green paintwork in the kitchen and remembered that style from when she was house-sharing. They surveyed the backyard from the doorstep, and observed the lake over the blocked drain. A rusting sculpture of a goat stood forlornly in it.

‘Isn’t it lovely,’ said Gracie.

They walked back through the creaking house to the front. Sean wrapped his arms around Gracie, and they waved goodbye from the doorstep.

That afternoon Jeff and Jill stood in Gracie’s old room and looked at the empty space where her bed and table and chest used to be. Instead there were clumps of fluff, and scrape marks on the floors. Then they looked at all the stuff she had left behind; a cupboard full of books, folios of art work, folders and note books, a wardrobe half-full of abandoned clothes and a bin crammed with torn pages of purple writing, tissues and lolly wrappers.

‘What will we do without her?’ asked Jeff. He rubbed the back of his head.

Jill touched his sleeve.

‘We’ll do what we used to do,’ she said. ‘Remember?’



## MOTEL

**Beverly Lello**

Yackandandah VIC

### *A burning issue*

Erle's taking off his boots and lining them up next to the chair on the verandah. Jan's decided to tell him when he comes inside and washes his hands. Before he has a beer.

'I'm too knackered to move, Jan,' he shouts. 'Bring my beer out here, love?'

Jan takes a stubby out of the fridge and uses the opener hanging from a hook on the wall. *Maybe saying it outside would be better.*

'Ta,' he says. 'It's too bloody hot to be working.'

She leans on the verandah railing and looks out at the parched garden, the withered paddocks, the remorseless blue of the sky. They need rain. A fire could gallop across those paddocks and incinerate the garden and house in minutes. She shakes the thought away. Needs to keep her focus. She loves this place, they both do, but it's consuming Erle and if they don't do something it will consume her too. *When I turn around, I'll tell him.*

'Bloody tractor's stuffed. Wouldn't start,' he says, taking a long swig from the stubby.

Jan hears the frustration in his voice. It's not the first time the tractor has let him down. He'll be out in the shed tonight prodding and poking at the wires in the engine instead of feet up with a cup of tea watching *Four Corners*. Would they ever have a moment to relax together or even talk over dinner about something other than debt and drought? These thoughts butt her into blurting it out.

'Erle, I've accepted the cleaning job at the motel.'

He frowns. 'Not that rubbish talk again,' he says. 'Thought we'd agreed. Your place is here. On the farm. Looking after us, me and the kids.'

'You said that, not me. Erle, it's 2001, not the fifties. There are different ways of looking after family. Me staying at home won't buy Jess that dress she wants for the deb ball or the bike Craig's saying he can't live without or' – and she thinks this is a bit of an inspiration – 'pay for the tractor repairs.'

There's a plaintive note in her voice. She wanted to sound surer. Firmer. She backed down last time. She stands a bit straighter. 'I've already accepted the job. I start Monday.'

The two creases between his eyebrows squeeze together, deepen. He lifts the bottle, drains it and says, 'That's it then ... not going to talk ...? You know I don't want my wife working.'

'We've talked, Erle. Endlessly. It's not paying the bills.'

He levers himself out of the sagging chair. The screen door screeches as he wrenches it open. It slaps shut behind him.

She bends and picks up the discarded bottle, straightens the boots he'd kicked aside. *He'll get used to the idea.* She hopes.

### *Keeping the home fires burning*

May 2002

Dear Margie,

Thanks for the lovely letter. Your European trip sounded amazing. Who knows when we'll ever get to travel or even go on a holiday. Probably, if we do, we'll choose somewhere wet, like the Sunshine Coast. This drought seems endless. The summer was so harsh. I've given up on the garden. Even the bath water hasn't been enough to save the veggie patch. The paddocks are crackling dry but so far, no fires and winter is almost here.

You'll be wanting to hear how the job's going. Confession. I want to write this in capital letters: I LOVE IT. 'Slave labour,' Jess calls it. Do you know what she said when I told them where I was going to be working? 'It's embarrassing, Mum. What if you barge in on someone you know, having an affair or something.' 'Too much daytime television during the last school holidays,' is what I said to her. 'Besides, no one in Yackandandah would be silly enough to stay in the only motel in town if they were having an affair. I'll be completely anonymous.' Not true, I've discovered, but she doesn't need to know that.

You'll laugh, but even though it's housework, there's something about stepping in the doorway of Room 3 or 5 or 8, seeing chaos and smelling the lingering odours of the night's occupants, then stepping out twenty minutes later with order restored and the room smelling of air freshener and clean sheets. You can never get the bedspread smooth on our lumpy old

mattress – you know, the one we inherited from Erle's parents – but these motel beds, you can make them as smooth as icing on a butter cake and there's a special way the pillows tuck under the top of the bedspread that's just perfect. Maybe when Erle gets more used to the idea of a working wife, we'll treat ourselves to a night in the Deluxe Suite!

I can see you rolling your eyes. I've never worked like you though. It's not to say that I haven't been happy with the farm and the kids. And Erle. But women's lib passed me by. And now I can contribute. Erle's still making it a bit difficult. Stubborn, you know how he is.

I'm keeping the home fires burning though and Jess and Craig have been great. Amazing what the promise of a deb dress and a BMX does for teenagers' level of cooperation.

Hope to see you up this way soon.

Love Jan xxx

### *There's a change in the wind*

'Jan, a word if you don't mind,' says Martin, the motel owner, peering around the door of the room she's cleaning. 'Just pop into the office after you've finished in here.'

Jan's heart does a flip. She had been miles away, thinking about a new recipe she wants to try when the kids come home for her birthday on the weekend. Fifty has to be special, even if she is cooking the meal herself.

Things had looked up on the farm recently. Good rains at last. High prices for cattle. She'd scaled back on the cleaning job for a few months when Erle had his bypass; he'd hoped she'd quit altogether. His resistance was like a lick of something sour when she prattled on about an incident at the motel. There were so many stories to tell, but that crease in his forehead made her turn back to the sink and scrub much harder at a stubborn bit of congealed egg.



(cont.)

## MOTEL

**Beverly Lello**

Yackandandah VIC

There'd been quite a few empty rooms in the motel lately. The owner had installed a new manager and he wasn't up to the job. The person in that front office needed to make people feel welcome. A friendly smile. A bit of interest shown in where they were from, where they were going. She'd done a stretch at the front desk when the manager before last left suddenly. She'd liked the extra responsibility and the booking.com ratings had risen a couple of points. And now another manager has quit. Jan senses change in the wind. Dare she hope he's going to offer her the job?

Ten minutes later, she leaves the office, Martin's words butterflying around in her head, words tumbling out of her mouth even though there's no one to hear them. 'Me, managing the place. What will the kids think? Margie won't believe it. Erle, well, be brave Jan. He has said you're too clever to be a cleaning lady.'

She gives the pillows an extra hard thump, tugs the bedspread into place and sings, 'I'm on fire.'

### *Fire burn*

The TV is on in the office all day. Jan wants to block it out but feels compelled to keep listening. They're saying eighty-four people have been confirmed dead in Victoria's bushfires. Updates are a remorseless litany of tragedy. The flames are raging, merging, ravaging, blackening swathes of bushland, incinerating towns. Smoke clogging the air.

She hears that six people have been found dead in one car. *A whole family.* That fiend they've always dreaded is here.

Jess and Craig are safe in the city but it's Erle she's worried about. He's out there with the fire truck. Thank heavens they won't let him man a hose anymore. Still, it's unpredictable, this beast devouring the state. Last night, they stood on the verandah and watched the fire burn along the ridge line above the farm, bright flickering arcs of red kept at bay, for now, by the southerly.

The image of that family in the car is lingering in her head as she listens to yet another interview from a survivor: 'It was like a bombing attack, explosions, things crashing. Terrifying.' There's a horn blast outside and she rushes out the door.

'I've got some special customers for you, love,' Erle says as he climbs out of the truck.

A young woman tumbles out the passenger side, her face streaked with soot and tears. She stumbles toward Jan. 'I tried hosing the front of the house,' she gasps. 'The heat just sucked up the moisture. I could hear the fire coming, like a train. I threw the kids in the car. It wouldn't start. He saved us.' She gestures toward Erle who is opening the back door, lifting a small child into his arms.

Erle's soot-blackened face is streaked with sweat. The look on his face, the thin arms of the child cinching his neck, makes her want to cry with love.

### *Like a house on fire*

Jan decides it's time to retire. On the morning of her last day, she selects the newest and crispest sheets from the linen cupboard and makes up the bed in the Deluxe Suite, even though it is no longer her job.

Later that night, Erle throws back the sheet and heads for the shower. *He's still got a great body*, she thinks, settling back against the pile of pillows. Then he's back in the room. 'Where are my glasses? Am I the only person who can't read the labels on these little bottles?' He wants to shampoo his hair and he can't tell the difference between the shampoo and the conditioner. He's already grumbled about the impossible-to-open-with-wet-hands tiny soap bar encased in paper. He finds some of these fiddly things even harder now with the burnt hand. He's loving being here, though. He'd whispered that and more in her ear just half an hour ago. They might not be on the Sunshine Coast, but she's finally got him into a motel room on a holiday of sorts.

After the fire – its appetite eventually quenched, their town and property spared – he'd agreed it was time to scale back the farm. They'd do more things together. So, on this her last day of work, she'd phoned Erle from the motel office and said casually, 'Come and pick me up, bring your toothbrush. You might not be going home tonight.'

It was as good a time as any to make a start on a new direction.



# BLEEDING

**Anthea Fraser Gupta**

Fairy Meadow NSW

**JUDGE'S COMMENT**

*Two cousins growing up as young children slowly drift apart with the years, but it is only when the narrator reaches adulthood that she comes to understand the deeper reasons for her cousin Elizabeth's cruelty as a child and her abnormal behaviour and physical development growing up.*

**AUTHOR'S COMMENT**

*I wrote a sad story. I am glad the judges liked it.*

For one week in four I couldn't swim. Here we were, me and my best friend on the most beautiful beach ever. Clear water, pink sand, warm air and cool water, and sea caves waiting to be swum into and explored. Fortunately, we were simultaneously afflicted. She was a dancer and I often wondered how she managed a leotard when she had her period. But I couldn't ask her. I was fifteen and it was the sixties. You didn't talk about that stuff even with your best friend.

Such a nuisance, especially for a swimmer. Success with tampons was five years in the future.

And all the other stuff. How many times did a tell-tale stain appear on a skirt? Or worse, on a seat? Did I smell? Either of blood or of talcum powder, both give-aways. A quarter of my life. But I had already become reconciled to the messiness and embarrassment in a strange way.

I had a cousin, Elizabeth, who was a couple of years younger than me. Our mothers had a falling out that probably lasted a few months. They reconciled at a wedding when I was five and Elizabeth was three. I was wearing a cherry red coat with a black collar and enjoying a kind of food I had never had before. A waitress in black dress and white apron carried around a huge circular tray and held it out to you. On it were all sorts of different tiny things to eat. Some had cheese on top of biscuits. Some had my favourite food on thinly sliced bread – sardines. Some had little cakes. You could take whatever you liked and eat it standing up without even using a plate. I was interrupted in this introduction to sophistication by a chubby little figure erupting in pink frills and ribbons.

"I'm Elizabeth Anne Davis," she said grandly.

Obviously I returned the announcement with my far more impressive full name, from my loftier height.

We saw Elizabeth and her parents regularly after that, except for the gaps caused by the intermittent tiffs between our mothers. When Elizabeth was five she and my aunty both suddenly lost weight, and were thirsty all the time. We all went on a bus tour together and my aunty said that all she could think of was waterfalls. And where the next stop would be. And whether she would make it to the toilet in time. Horrifically, on one occasion she didn't make it to the toilet. I don't remember Elizabeth complaining though.

Treatment for diabetes was brutal then. I knew about the two injections they both took every day, the huge needles, the sterilisation, weighing all the carbohydrates. Elizabeth did what she was told to do. She used the little scales conscientiously, and ate diabetic chocolate for a treat. She was allowed to eat as much butter and cheese as she liked – fats didn't count. She was soon plump again.

When we visited my aunt's house, we had coffee, lunch, tea and supper without ever needing to wash up. My aunt had a house full of china and embroidered linen. I once worked out you could eat for three days without using the same tea set more than once.

On one occasion, between tea and supper, we were there when Elizabeth was having her bath. The two fathers sat in the living room drinking tea and watching football, while the two mothers and I crowded into the tiny bathroom and chatted while Elizabeth was getting ready. My aunt perched on the edge of the bath, my mother leant against the washbasin, and I sat on the bathmat.

Elizabeth climbed slowly into the bath and knelt as if in church. Then she lowered her buttocks carefully into the water. I tended to throw myself into the bath and get into trouble for splashing. Elizabeth gave a squeak and started to cry.

"My little house is sore," she said.

While my aunt comforted Elizabeth, my mother had to explain to me, quietly, that "little house" was what Elizabeth called the area between her legs.

"They do get sore down there, don't they," said my aunt after Elizabeth had settled in the bath, still not very happy.

"Oh yes," said my mother, which was strange, as I never got sore down there.

I didn't ask my mother why she agreed with my aunt so quickly. Silently, I wondered why I didn't ever feel sore between my legs, given that it was to be expected. Should I feel sore there? It did sometimes sting a bit if you used Pears soap, though not if you used Cussons, but Elizabeth had just sat down. She hadn't even picked up the soap, which I saw was non-stinging Cussons anyway. But water? Water didn't sting between your legs. After the bath my aunt put cream between Elizabeth's legs. I never needed cream there.

As we got older, Elizabeth and I did not get on. She had a little dog called Dusty who she liked to pick up by his front legs and swing around. She made him go to places and be in positions he did not want to be in. She sat on him and laughed, and she pulled his long fur. When he was naughty, she hit him on his tiny face. When I came to visit, Dusty would snuggle up to me and flinch when Elizabeth came near. She didn't usually let him stay on my knee for very long. If neither of our mothers were watching, she would lock him in another room, away from me.

It was years before I realised that she probably didn't like the way I looked either, and didn't like the way my father was, compared to hers.

My father did not ever want to be alone with Elizabeth. He said he did not like the way she sat on his knee. She was certainly soppy and keen on kissing. So was her father, though I was expert in avoiding his wet kisses. We did all go swimming once or twice, but Elizabeth wasn't really into outdoor exercise. Nor was my uncle – he and my father had little in common. My mother and my aunt were close, though, when they hadn't argued, and I could see why, because my aunt was fun. She could go on a long hike in high heels and she did amazing embroidery. And she could play the piano for us all to sing hymns together.



(cont.)

## BLEEDING

Anthea Fraser Gupta

Fairy Meadow NSW

My parents had made a will, and my aunt and uncle would have been my guardians if anything had happened to my parents. Luckily they both stayed healthy and very much alive. I would not have relished Elizabeth as my sister.

Elizabeth reached her teens. And her shape was still that of a chubby five year old. She had flat breasts and a big belly with no waist. I heard from whispers between my mother and her mother that her periods hadn't started.

I did talk to my mother about that. I asked whether my aunt had discussed it with the specialist at the diabetes clinic. I had been to the diabetes clinic with Elizabeth and had met this imposing man.

"It isn't important," said my mother.

Compared, I suppose she meant, to going into a coma or going blind or damaging your kidneys. All of which happened to my aunt and Elizabeth later. Apparently Elizabeth's parents didn't think it was worth raising such a little detail with the very important specialist. It wasn't a matter of life or death if a girl didn't menstruate. No-one liked having a period.

But the more I thought about it, and the more I saw Elizabeth's wrong shape, the more accepting I became of my own messiness every month. It was normal, after all. I was normal.

They should have tried to make Elizabeth look normal too. Sometimes people even thought she was pregnant because of that huge belly. They seemed to notice the belly rather than her having no bust. There must be some connection between that peculiar shape and her periods not starting. Couldn't both have been fixed?

My mother wanted me to learn to use tampons. I was surprised how small they were.

"Yes," said my mother, "But here's a funny thing – your aunty told me she's never been able to use them because they are too big for her."

She paused. I frowned. I had never seen a penis in the flesh.

"I didn't say anything of course," said my mother, "But I thought to myself that tampons are a lot smaller than a man."

"But she's had a baby," I said.

"Well, there was something odd about the way Elizabeth was born," said my mother, "There was a story about your uncle having to go on the bus with a sample of sperm in a jam jar that he was taking to the hospital."

At university, Elizabeth wore kaftans and cloaks. She pencilled in eyebrows and wore turbans to cover her bare scalp. I favoured trousers and t-shirts, and swung a thick plait behind me.

The memory of the dog was still a source of enmity between Elizabeth and me. Not that I spoke about it to her.

One day I spotted her rolling through the town, trailing fabric, in a jeering group of rich kids. I started a smile but she walked past me. She didn't want her friends to know she was related to me. No problem. It gave me a reason not to speak to her again. I had my own life and she was welcome to hers. I still saw my aunt and uncle, and wrote to my aunt regularly until she died. In her last illness, when she suffering from glaucoma, I gave her a good laugh when I offered to buy her some grass to relieve the pain. I was into alternative remedies and she knew how to smoke, so it would have been no big deal.

By the time Elizabeth and I were in our forties, the world had changed. My mother and I understood many things that we had not understood in the sixties.

Unlike me, my mother kept in contact with Elizabeth throughout her last years of illness and isolation. And after a gruelling session with Elizabeth, my mother would discuss her with me. We came to understand why Elizabeth's father had killed himself soon after my aunt's early death.

And after Elizabeth told my mother more about her father, my mother and I revisited our memories and we knew she was telling the truth. We understood why she was sore in the bath. We understood why she made my father uncomfortable when she sat on his knee. And we even understood why her parents might not have wanted her to develop the shape of a woman and have periods.

Understanding it all did not make me want to see Elizabeth again. Understanding is not the same as liking. Understanding someone doesn't mean you have to be nice to them. There was no need for her to be cruel to the dog.



## THE BAY

**Kate Herring**  
Oyster Bay NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*'This is not a traditional narrative but a meditative piece on the healing power of nature. Set in one of the small bays that line the Georges River, it is an uplifting and personal story of the narrator's attempts to create an idyllic garden, backdropped by the soft grey of native bushland. Evocative and joyful to read.'*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*Thank you to the judges of the Sutherland Shire Literary Competition. As a very new writer, I'm thrilled to receive this award for a humble story that I wrote as a testament to the natural beauty of the waterways of the Sutherland Shire.*

*Only weeks ago, I contemplated this special place, my home, and feared for the very survival of my ancient garden, as it struggled through the devastation of drought, dust and bushfire smoke. It seemed that the apocalyptic days of climate change had arrived. My heart broke.*

*But, climate change notwithstanding, small miracles happen. With the advent of the rains, I've experienced moments of joy and gratitude as I've witnessed the garden and the surrounding bushland burst with new life. The resilience of the natural world amazes me.*

*It's incumbent on all of us, as guardians, to continue to nurture and respect this special place, to keep it safe, and preserve its fragile uniqueness.*

Even though my little old weatherboard cottage is in suburban Sydney, it is extraordinarily quiet. My street is a cul de sac so there's no through traffic, and downhill, past our place, it overhangs one of the bays that line the Georges River. The street and the bay are skirted by remnant eucalypt forest – mostly rugged blackbutts and angophoras. I imagine that they block some of the usual suburban noises, as well as providing an evergreen shade canopy and shelter for the local wildlife. Multitasking.

Our end of the street has spacious blocks with single dwellings that are inhabited by people "like me". We get on well and can rely on each other, but we all like our space, the peace and quiet, and the bush. So just before my family moved into our house in 2013, when my 19 year old daughter drove past the house at midnight to take a look at her new home, she was quite disturbed by the dark silence. "Mum, where are you taking me? It's the zombie apocalypse down there!"

But she grew to love the place. She eventually left home to move overseas, but by then she'd established a habit of doing her yoga and meditation on the front verandah, which looks through our camellia hedge down the hill to the remnant bushland. With her eyes closed and a bit of imagination, she could picture herself enshrouded by the grey foliage of an indigenous forest.

I love my cottage. Perhaps I'm drawn to that particularly Australian style of house, the old weatherboard, because of the memories it evokes. I'm reliving the days of my childhood when I was loved and nurtured in those same humble little places of refuge. I spend my days within walls and floors made of timber that was harvested from the indigenous forests that have always seduced me.

I'm not religious, but there's a kind of worship in standing at my windows or on the deck, and pondering the bush, the mangroves and the rippling water just beyond.

I'm often stopped in my daily routine by the silence. Just listen. At first it seems as if the silence oppresses, weighs thick upon me. But I listen more deeply. After rain, there's the constant buzz of crickets. A kookaburra down at the bay is chuckling its raucous laugh. Its friends (or are they competitors?) join in. It becomes a cacophony. Then a catbird shrieks across the tree canopy, chased by the toddler tantrums of an aggressive flock of native mynahs. King parrots sing to each other in their flock, telling them to join the feast that a kindly human has left out for them. Across the valley, the high pitched rhythmic hum of

an electric suburban train grows and grows as it crosses the river, then diminishes. If the sound is lower and rumbling, slower, I know without looking that it's a coal train.

If there's a jet boat on the river, or an aircraft piercing the sky and my eardrums, I feel offended by the rudeness of human interruption of my meditation. How dare they ("They") feel entitled to enjoy their noisy activity? This place is sacred.

The house hides away from the street beyond a living purple wall of mature plum trees, enclosed by trees and shrubs. After we moved in, I set to work on the ancient garden. Although it lies in a Sydney suburb, it has the feeling of a mountain garden that is reminiscent of the Blue Mountains or the Southern Highlands. Over fifty years, the plantings of classic camellias, gardenias, magnolias, maples, roses, frangipani, had evolved into a lush urban oasis, gently backdropped by the soft grey of native bush. I was determined to embellish this living jewel with my own favourite features –

native grasses and reeds, a frog pond, living carpets of native violets, and, if climate change and drought permitted, some lacey tree ferns.

I'd struggled to entice frogs into our previous garden, which was just over the hill. So my expectations were set low. I constructed a tiny frog paradise – a deep bowl, filled with water plants to hide in and surrounded by rocks and bits of old logs and mulch. Then I waited. Meanwhile, I'd pruned the tops off a weedy dracaena that had taken over a corner in the backyard, plonking them in a blue plastic bucket of water. Eventually they'd grow roots, and I could plant them out in another corner.

Within weeks, the distinctive sound of the striped marsh frog started to knock at the windows of the house. Puzzled but excited, I embarked on a treasure hunt for the source of the call. As I walked past the bucket of dracaena stems, the sound grew louder, before it stopped, recommencing only after I'd passed safely by. They're shy, you see. The frogs had moved in. My blue bucket, their new home.

Sydney's temperate coastal climate doesn't encourage seasonal trees and shrubs to display the full spectrum of their glory. But the maples make a valiant effort, perhaps sheltered from nature's extremes by their hillside location, and their foliage manages a brief change of colour before their leaves crinkle and fall in a brown carpet. Some years, the weeping cherries have barely a bloom on their bare branches, but some years, as this year, they grow a full petticoat – pink at the front of the house, white at the back.

When I sold my aunt's house at Conjola, I carted back to Sydney whatever plants I could salvage from her own lakeside garden. There was a deep shared connection with our places – our humble weatherboard homes and the gardens that we'd both created around them. It was a privilege to be able to maintain that connection even after her life on earth had ended. So my garden is rich with her memories, her plants thriving in their adopted home.

To a casual observer, or an extroverted lover of a scheduled existence, my tiny, insular life must appear as slow, mundane, meaningless, shallow. But I know that there are those who long for this life, whose tormented souls ache for the bliss of seclusion. The endless soliloquies of nature and silence are constant embraces for me. Each moment of meditation, peace, calm, carries me forward on my healing journey. I believe that an unseen force has brought me to this place, awakening my broken spirit to the abundant forces of life and humanity.

In this place, I am lifted up by an emotion that was unknown to me for fifty years. When I first experienced it, I didn't know what it was, or what to do with it. But now it has become a close companion. As I move through my day, it lifts me up, momentarily, and then goes on its way again, until the next time, when I'm working in my garden or gazing at the bay or cherishing the silence.

It is joy.

## THEMED SHORT STORIES



# 29<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 1770

**Leone McManus**

Como NSW

34° 00" 16' S, 151° 13" 04' E

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*An imaginative and creative story told from the point of view of 13-year-old Isaac Manley, who sailed with Captain Cook on HMS Endeavour. Isaac encounters a tall Aboriginal boy holding a spear and is impressed by his formidable hunting skills in one of the first meetings between the two cultures.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*I'm grateful that I've been acknowledged. More than anything else, I just wanted to make sure that they put the Aboriginal stories more to the fore rather just simply what white men have done. That was what I was trying to do. We have an unbalanced view of history.*

The straining main and the topgallant mast sails, which had been driven by a south easterly wind, deflated like a balloon as the barque entered the shallow bay. The anchor was lowered about a half mile from the southern beach whilst every hand was on deck and awaited orders to go ashore. Even the ship's poulterer, Forby Sutherland, who had been suffering from consumption, emerged from the lower decks, to gaze forlornly on (Kamay) New Holland, little knowing that he would be eternally at rest there. On shore, the mariners could see the huts of the "Indians" who gestured to them to leave, even before they lowered the yawl of the ship.

The sky was an iridescent azure which changed with the voluminous cumulous clouds which swept in from the east and reflected silvery slivers of light into the shallow bay. The boy stood on the prow of the ship and seemed to be transfixed by the stingrays which glided through the aquamarine water as if they performed a ballet. He observed schools of sea mullet, dusky flathead and mulloway which no-one on board could identify but were keen to snare. Out of curiosity several dolphins emerged from the crystal depths of the bay and the boy gasped with delight as they lunged back into the waters.

He returned to his daily duties which included feeding the avaricious Goat but his mind was on going ashore to New Holland despite the possible hostile "Indians" and other imagined monsters. The boy assisted with the banalities of preparing the row boats while he lowered two greyhounds belonging to Mr Banks into the vessels and settled himself out of the way. On reaching the silvery shore, Cook stated that the boy Isaac, should leap out first and hold the dogs until Mr Banks was ready. Two natives with spears approached them and gestured to the crew to leave but a musket shot was fired at them after which they retreated. Subsequently, Mr Banks, Mr Solander and other crew members gathered with them quills, quires, telescopes and all the equipment to gather the spiky, brush-like flora which they saw growing near the beach and quickly made haste into the bush.

The boy, now alone, sensed the adrenalin which surged in his being, while he watched as the other midshipmen who headed west down the beach in search of water, faded away. The sun beamed on the sparkling sea brilliant as diamonds, the crystals like a thousand chandeliers and the warmth of it awakened the curiosity in him. He walked in an easterly direction towards the rocks at the end of the bay, until he spied several pools near the mouth of the bay. Some of these larger rock pools, which were open to the sea, had weed which swayed gently with the waves which washed over the lip of the sandstone rock and in others he saw small crabs and tiny shells. He was just about to walk on when he saw a golden object disappear into the weeds and to the boy thought it was a trick of his imagination or the light. He stopped and waited imagining treasure or Spanish coins, doubloons or golden guineas...he was frozen by anticipation and wonder.

The golden object reappeared, glided through the still pool, darted in and out in and out of the weeds, disappearing then reappearing over and over. From his standing position, he could see that it was a tiny golden dragon with a long snout which glided along with a fine caudal fin along its back. It swam gracefully and swayed rhythmically. It emerged from the weed and to the boy's delight another one slightly smaller arose from the depths as if it danced with the other. The weedy sea dragons darted down through the translucent depths as if inspired to perform conjuring tricks able to disappear then emerge and their golden glow flashed through the rock pool. The boy thought that the weedy sea dragon, (later classified as *Phylloteryx Taeniolatus*), would have enthralled Mr Banks and Mr Solander who were collecting plants and strange vegetation peculiar to the sandy shore of Stingray Bay.

The boy, who was only thirteen, stood spellbound quietly gasping, giggling and gaping at the golden dance being performed below him. He stood mutely until the dancers disappeared and stayed hidden in the weeds, like a magic trick. He looked up to see the

Endeavour rocking and bobbing in the distance, several muted voices shouting on the beach and the reappearance of one of Mr Bank's dogs. It was then he spied a track leading into the bush and from where he stood it appeared to be well established. The boy had listened carefully to Captain Cook's orders but there was no command to avoid the "woods". He stared at the path which vanished into the large outcrops of sandstone and bush whilst he gathered 'Dutch courage', (without the alcohol), decided to investigate. Curiosity lured him and being only thirteen he had little thought for his own well being then took his stride. He tentatively entered the path and as he peered along it, made absolutely no sound....

Another tall, willowy boy was standing in the bush further along the same track, his hands holding a gamai, gunang and mugu but his mind was on the small goanna he had spied nearby. He was about to follow the trail of the goanna when his keen ears detected a sound near the end of the path. As was the custom taught him by his Gweagal elders he made no noise but waited and waited and waited. It was a strange sound, one which he could not interpret and he thought that it may have been one of his tribe.

Isaac Manley had walked gingerly along the path to where the trail opened out and he was about to proceed when he noticed a long black stick like object with red underneath very near where he stood. The stick was about two and a half yards long and appeared to be soaking up the sun as it lay on the sandstone rock. It moved. Isaac froze where he stood. He was well versed in the Christian Bible to recognise the devil incarnate which lead to the fall of mankind and expulsion from the garden of Eden. It was only then, when he looked up when he realised that another boy, holding a spear was watching him as he stood. Two worlds had collided. No-one moved, no-one made a sound, no-one breathed and the universe held its breath and waited.



(cont.)

## 29<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 1770

**Leone McManus**

Como NSW

Isaac saw the boy raise his gamai and point the tip in his direction while he deftly lowered his gunang and mugu. The spear housed a microlith which could penetrate its victim causing great damage and then widen the wound when withdrawn. Unable to move Isaac watched as the boy hurled it. It seemed that time was suspended and Isaac thought of Cook's chronometer and wondered if it had stopped. The spear severed the snake in half, its head landing only inches from Isaac's foot. It twisted, recoiled and revolted as its red underbelly spasmed, convulsed and finally flexed. A kookaburra laughed which seemed to start more birds cackling in conjunction and the bush was alive with a cacophony of sound.

Isaac did not move, nor blink, nor think... he was suspended like one of Mr Banks' specimens. Isaac gasped...

The Gweagal boy spoke, "Gan,Badalya."(Food)

Isaac stood still and noticed that the aboriginal boy had his front right tooth missing and recalled that Cook said that some natives in the Pacific also followed this practice. He wore a nose ornament, which appeared to be made of bone and he had scars on his arms and abdomen. He was naked except for the lines of clay drawn on his body. The native scooped the snake carcass, picked up his weapons, ignored Isaac and disappeared into the bush. Isaac was left to ponder what had transpired and he was in awe of the tall native who strode off quickly back to the bush.

Sounds of shouting, on the beach drew Isaac's attention and he realised that Lieutenant Hicks and Midshipman Clark were calling his name. He made haste back to the beach to see the bo'sun, John Gathrey, pacing up the beach near the rock pools. Gathrey told Isaac that Mr Banks, burdened by a vast array of flora and several corpulent lizards needed his assistance with the dogs, particularly 'Lady', the greyhound. Isaac headed west along the beach and noticed the ship's surgeon, William Monkhouse, treating the Endeavour's sailmaker, John Ravenhill for an injury sustained by touching a bluish jellyfish.

The sailmaker Monkhouse appeared to be in constant pain and little could be done to alleviate his suffering. Six Indians had thrown a spear at Dr Monkhouse previously and then they retreated along the beach.

Mr Banks was clearly distressed by the time Isaac caught up to him and Mr Solander, who nursed, the greyhound, Lady, which had been lamed after the pursuit of a large quadruped about the size of a rabbit, was whimpering. Isaac stroked Lady's injured leg and saw that Mr Banks looked dishevelled with several tears in his attire and needles protruding from his jacket and shoes. Cook paced along the beach with quartermaster Evans, gestured to the others to retreat to the yawl and return to the Endeavour, which bobbed in the chop.

The Union Jack which had been furled, previously that morning and had flapped uncontrollably in the sky, now hung limply. All around the screeching of parrots and parroquets deafened the crew whilst the ocean roared loudly as if to state this land was a wild untamed expanse, with secrets yet to be revealed. The crew spoke little on the yawl, the waves whipped and the wind wild began to howl as they neared the Endeavour. Isaac saw two sea snakes slither through the water near several stingrays and all around were the sounds of the South Wind, from which he thought he heard a voice say 'not here'. No-one spoke, no-one commented and all felt a sense of isolation and despair lost in an ancient land at the end of the earth.

### POSTSCRIPT

Isaac George Manley was about twelve when he joined Cook on the Endeavour in 1768.

He rose to be Admiral of the White in 1830 and Admiral of the Red in 1837. He was eighty two years old when he died after an distinguished career in the British Navy and was the last survivor of the Endeavour voyage with Captain Cook.

## THEMED SHORT STORIES



# OLD SCHOOL

**Claire Riley**  
Bangor NSW

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*Set in a high school, this story uses wry humour and contrasting characters to good effect. Grace, the sole member of the school science club, organises a science competition and classmate Jack impresses his school friends with his intricate knowledge of the sustainable fish traps used by Indigenous people for thousands of years.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*For thousands of years Indigenous Australians have been caring for the environment in sustainable ways. It seems more important than ever to be listening to this breadth of knowledge and understanding. I hope this story, in a very small way, might pay respect to that, and show that some of the best ways to meet our environmental challenges might also be the oldest. Thank you Sutherland Shire Council for the generous prize and for the opportunity to write.*

Casuarina High School had settled into its Monday morning routine. In the front office, Maureen McGovern welcomed a familiar face.

“Back again, Mr Mitchell?” she asked. She received the late note from the student.

“You can’t seem to stay away can you love,” she said to him. “How was your little break?”

“Well, I was suspended Ms McGovern,” he said. “I know that, pet. Go and sit down, the Principal is just finishing an assembly.”

Jack Mitchell took a seat outside the Principal’s office. On the noticeboard beside its door, he read:

**Science Prize! Design a sustainable project! Help preserve Australia’s resources! Win a \$5 canteen voucher!!**

The poster was hand painted on yellow cardboard, with inflated balloons bobbing from its corners. He could guess who’d made it. Grace Willson from Mr Dickson’s class. He knew from the punctuation marks. Her virtuous voice rang in your ears as you read it, even if you tried to ignore it. And he was trying.

“Jack,” Maureen called. The office door had opened. “Principal is ready for you.”

He took hold of his bag – empty, but it looked worse if you didn’t bring one at all – and entered the Principal’s office.

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“Overfishing,” Mr Dickson intoned, “at its current rate, could threaten up to eighty-five percent of the world’s fish. In your lifetime,” he continued, “that many fish could disappear if we do nothing to intervene.”

This startling declaration was met with hollow silence. Marshall Fitz scrolled on his phone. Melanie Chapman and her friends plugged their contraband headphones into their ears. There were bodies slumped over desks, tranquilised by their period one Geography lesson. He sensed an internal flame extinguish, a feeling that was increasingly common.

He’d thought kids were passionate about this problem. On the news, students were demonstrating in the streets. Here, the only sign of activity was Grace Willson, who was banging out furious notes on her laptop. Just then Jack Mitchell opened the classroom door and held out a note for Mr Dickson. Scrawled in the headmaster’s handwriting, it said “Added Jack to your class role. I owe you one.” Mr Dickson hurriedly screwed up the note and dropped it in the bin.

“Take a seat Mr Mitchell, any seat,” he said, motioning the boy inside. Jack sauntered in, dropped heavily into a seat at the front and then he too wilted over his desk. Nap time.

Grace’s hand was in the air. “Sir, may I make an announcement?” She asked, “It’s on behalf of Science Club.”

Mr Dickson made a sweeping gesture with his arm, inviting her to take the stage. Everybody knew that Grace was the only member of the Science Club.

“Ok everyone, I know we’re all really concerned about what we’ve heard today. The loss of our ocean biodiversity will affect us all.” Grace paused for impact. The class remained impervious to impact of any kind, and so she continued. “If we want a healthy future on this planet we call home, then we need to be the solution. It’s up to us to make a difference. We can’t sit around and wait for politicians to intervene when all they care about is themselves and their paycheck!” She had actually raised her fist now. Mr Dickson wondered if she might also be the school’s sole member of the Drama Club. But he found himself nodding anyway, and an idea began to form.

Grace was still relishing her platform. “This year’s Science Prize is about Conservation. Your mission is to design a sustainable solution

to help conserve a precious resource. Can anybody think of a resource under threat by climate change?” She asked. She gazed hopefully around the room. “Anyone?”

After a long pause, Mr Dickson came to the rescue. “Water”, he said.

“Yes!” She responded, “Anything else? Mr Dickson mentioned one at the start of the lesson....”

There was movement at the back of the room. “Um, fish?” a voice floated uncertainly to the surface.

“Yes, overfishing threatens to drain the ocean of sea life. You see, there are so many issues to explore. Design a solution that will conserve our resources and live to see the future!” Having missed the veiled threat beneath her own words, Grace, breathless and invigorated, returned to her seat.

Mr Dickson knew there were mere seconds left until the bell. The perfect window through which to lob a grenade and then duck for cover. “Right, well I know Grace made all of that sound distinctly voluntary, but it is in fact your next assignment, which is mandatory and contributes to your final report. Due in two weeks!” Heads now snapped up from their resting places.

“What?”

“Sir. No!”

“This is bullshit!”

“Detention Trent Morris!”

And then the bell. And the outbound stampede. And finally, blessedly, a wisp of smoke above the embers.

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## OLD SCHOOL

**Claire Riley**  
Bangor NSW

On the day of the voluntary but also mandatory Science Prize, half of the student body appeared to be missing. This was not uncommon, and Mr Dickson tried to fight off the discouragement. Instead, he surveyed from the top of the room those who had made the effort. Grace was sitting at the front, half obscured by a large cardboard contraption with empty soda bottles masking taped to it.

“It’s due today?” He heard Melanie Chapman squeal, “Oh my god I totally forgot!” She fell onto the desk and buried her head into her folded arms. Another candidate for drama club.

Grace presented first. Some sort of rain catching implement that could irrigate gardens. An excellent idea, as long as there was rain.

Trent Morris presented a conspicuously similar design to Grace’s. Marshall Fitz had brought in a solar powered remote control car, prompting a few moments of lively panic as it zipped and darted among the student’s feet. The car was obviously not an original creation and did not fit the requirements of the task, and he was promptly told to shut it off and sit down. Mr Dickson sighed.

“Anyone else? Has anybody not presented that intended to?” He surveyed the quiet room. A sense of anti-climax loomed. One student remained.

“Jack? Let’s hear from you please.”

Mr Dickson sat down and projected a sense of happy anticipation.

Jack stalled for time, fumbling inside his bag. He gave up and stepped empty handed to the front of the room.

He cleared his throat. Paused. He cleared it again.

“He hasn’t done it!” Marshall Fitz called out.

“Quiet,” Mr Dickson called. “When you’re ready Jack.”

“Right, well. I have family up at Brewarrina. Um, near Bourke?”

There was a pause where Mr Dickson wondered where this was going, but he thought he knew. “Go on,” he said.

“There are these traps on the river bed. They’re fish traps.”

Suddenly Grace was out of her seat and crouch-running to the front of the room with her laptop. She connected some cords to the sockets beneath the projector, and an image appeared on the screen. A picture of a river bed decorated with a swirling pattern of rocks, arranged by a skilful and omniscient hand.

“This is the Barwon River,” Jack said, pointing to the picture. He nodded gratefully to Grace, who returned to her seat. “And these rocks you can see on the river bed have been there for thousands of years. They were put there by the Ngemba Wayilwan people to trap fish. The rocks are arranged so that they will only trap the ones that are big enough to eat. There are small gaps so that any fish that are too small, including the females, can swim straight through. They can go on to breed and keep the fish population up.”

The class was listening now, heads craning to see the picture on the screen. Mr Dickson was leaning back in his chair, relishing some internal glow.

Jack continued, “Thousands of years ago, if there was an important gathering, the rocks would be arranged to catch the fish, enough for a crowd. But when no fish were needed, the rocks would be moved again so that the fish could swim straight through.” Jack paused and noticed that Grace was gesturing at something. A poster on the wall. The terms of the assignment. “Oh um, it’s sustainable fishing. See, it’s designed to trap only what’s needed. And only the big, um, mature fish. So that’s what I thought of for the Science Prize. I didn’t make something new, I thought

about what worked before. I think it could help us move forward for a more sustainable, um,” he looked to Grace for some help, “We should do this if we want a future.”

Jack returned to his seat as though pulled there by magnetic force, and he burned red as the class applauded.

The bell rang and the students streamed from the room, a hungry, raucous tide. Mr Dickson switched off the projector and stood there listening as its soft hum receded and the classroom became quiet.

## THEMED SHORT STORIES



# CLAY

John Scholz

Willunga SA

A tall young man in an open necked dirt stained twill shirt is digging a deep and narrow trench in the drying bottom of a small dam.

All week he's been digging post holes for the fence on Hill Paddock, the western boundary of Poonindie Farm, above its orderly stone buildings. Fences keep sheep from straying but don't stop some people taking what they want. He knows how it is but he still works this land, for he was born here and he likes the sun and being able to see the land he is part of and the horizons his dreams leap over. He likes the little dam with its red clay and how that very earth had been formed by hand into bricks for the quoins of the little church and school.

He's walked past the dam every day on his way up to the Hill Paddock fence, observing the water shrink, the clay curl up its toes, the black tadpoles churning and gasping. This afternoon he'd left the fence and began digging this trench next to the surviving puddle.

The eleven year old son of the widowed Orcadian schoolmaster also walks up to the dam every afternoon after school to watch the man. The boy also senses some kind of lesson in the disappearing water and the gasping tadpoles.

Now the boy skips down the dusty slope and into the caldera.

The man stops, straightens, leans on his shovel and smiles. "Sundown? What're you doing out here?"

"Going for a walk Tilla. What you doing?"

The man nods at his digging. "I thought if I could make a bit of a hole, fill it with water, and then make a little channel from where the taddies are...Maybe we can give them enough time to turn into frogs. Some already got back legs."

The boy's heart skips. *We*. He said *we*. "Can I help?"

"Well, you can go down to the schoolhouse tank and bring us up a bucket of water. If you want?"

"Aye! I'll ask Da."

Tilla looks at him with wonder. Though the boy and his father have been at Poonindie since late last August, he is still amazed by the boy's white skin and pink freckles; above it thick short cropped hair red as the sunsets that began at about the same time as the boy and his father arrived. He loves them and their arse up way of talking. Straight away he'd called the lad Sundown. "Yeah okay Sundown. But quiet, like. If the overseer finds out he'll think up a reason to stop us. He's not a good man that one."

"Okay Tilla."

The boy's skinny ankles are wet with slosh from the half full tin bucket he hefts back up from the tank. By the time he gets back Tilla has crafted a long dish in the hard clay about knee deep in the middle and tapering up at each end. Like a piti, as the desert people at Poonindie call the bark dish. Tilla has only heard about the saltbush country, that land of rolling sand plains and iron hills from where his mother was driven before he was born.

"Good," Tilla grins. "Now can you pour it in?"

The boy's water only quarter fills the hole.

"We need more, Sundown."

They go down together, and Tilla fetches the big steel bucket used for fire ash from the school. They walk back up to the dam, grunting under the weight, laughing as water splashes and cools their bare feet. Tilla carries the big bucket on his outside, the smaller one between them. They are four legs, two faces, one connected being.

This time their buckets fill the hole, making a canoe shaped lake of water.

"Now comes the fun," says Tilla.

Tilla uses the corner of the shovel blade to scrape a shallow trench to connect the tadpoles' dying puddle and the new pool. Soon there is just a lip of clay stopping the tadpoles from connecting with their salvation.

"Okay Sundown. You do the last bit."

The boy squats. Clay deforms and swamps over his white toes. With the edge of his palm he pushes away the clay lip and immediately the tepid puddle flows down the little channel and meets the new water. Tadpoles writhe and slide like wet beads. The two puddles join up, their different waters mingling. The man and boy lean over it, corralling and scooping tadpoles till finally the creatures are all swimming freely.

Tilla squats, puts his elbows on his knees, fingers dangling. The boy copies him, their muddy fingertips almost touching. Their hands, feet, ankles are slick pink with wet clay already pulling at their skins as it dries.

"We look the same Tilla."

"Yeah, true. Did you see how many have got legs already? They'll soon be frogs, and then they can dig down, stay alive till it rains and the dam fills up. Pretty good, eh?"

"Pretty good Tilla. Hey. Look at your funny feet." Tilla looks down to see clay drying and cracking in painted swirls on his taut dark skin.

"Yeah? Look at you." He reaches out fingers and paints glossy pink stripes on the white cheek.

"Yeah Tilla, look at you!" The boy flicks his fingers and muddy freckles appear around Tilla's blinking brown eyes. "Har, you got freckles too now Tilla."

### JUDGE'S COMMENT

*Set in the late 19th Century, Clay describes the growing friendship between a skinny, eleven-year-old white boy and a young Aboriginal man digging fence holes on a farm. It's a story about two cultures coming together in a shared experience.*

### AUTHOR'S COMMENT

*This story is close to my heart and context as I grew up on Eyre Peninsula, and have studied the history of Poonindie - its great successes and eventual demise through greed. People were left with nothing despite years, and in some cases lifetimes, of hard work and contribution.*

*My heartfelt thanks to the Sutherland Shire, organisers, judges and sponsors. Short story writers and poets have limited opportunities to have their work published or recognised. Please keep this competition going - it's vital for writers to have their voice heard and appreciated.*

## THEMED SHORT STORIES

(cont.)



### CLAY

John Scholz

Willunga SA

“Alistair!” The voice comes from the rim of the dam above them. “Time for thoo to come in laddie. Come on Tilla. Looks like ye both a wash need.”

“Da! Look, we saved the tadpoles.”

Later the three of them sit on the verandah of the little stone house watching the red light fade from the stubble paddocks stretching down to the sea. Alistair and Tilla’s skins gleam newly washed, hair shining in the light of the kero lamp hanging above them.

“I have some news, boys. Significant news.”

Alistair leans into him. “What Da?”

“I am receiving a telegram. We’re to the city moving. To take over as headmaster of a big school I am.”

“No Da!”

He runs a finger along his red moustache. “I have no choice. A transfer it is or nothing. And they’ll find a new teacher. And the superintendent too. Called he has been rather suddenly, to the city by the government. A pity. A good man he is.”

Tilla doesn’t say anything but he knows. He’s heard them talking on the big farms of the district where he’s lately been learning the back breaking art of shearing. *If the blackfellas can grow wheat like that imagine what real farmers could do with that land?*

“Do thoo ken why the sunsets are red these days boys?” The schoolmaster changes the subject. “A volcano there was, on an island called Krakatoa. It erupted in August last year. Thousands of tons of dust into the atmosphere it blew, dust that all over the world has travelled. It makes the sunsets red. Everywhere, the same sunsets the world over.”

January 1894. Depression, a search for scapegoats, economic solutions. Competition for productive farm land. Out the back of The Empire Hotel where he is permitted to sit and drink, a laughable discrimination since it gives him the town’s premier view of the harbour, Tilla is using the blade of a pocket knife to clean the sheep lanolin and grit from

under his fingernails. He tolerates spending all day roasting inside a corrugated iron shed because it’s a job where they equally value a man who never kneels on a sheep, nor stains a fleece with blood. So fast and deft is he with the new Wolseley shearing gear that he runs roustabouts to exhaustion. Whirring machines and skilled men like him are bringing the wool industry back to profitability. He’s in demand and saving good money, though he’s not sure what for. He doesn’t drink much, only a beer or two on a Friday afternoon like this one, which he buys through the barred square hole in the out of sight alleyway at the side of the pub.

He looks at the wharf stacked with bags of wheat, a towering mesa higher than any building in the town. Another mountain of wool bales is next to it. The produce of this so called new land bound for the so called old country. New overseas buyers for what this new old country grows and digs up will lift it out of depression. Some of the wheat and wool on the wharf is from the land that used to be Poonindie Farm.

“Tilla?”

A burst of laughter and the faint smell of urine seeps from the hotel back door as Tilla turns to see a red haired bloke in new navy dungarees and a white shirt with rolled up sleeves approaching.

“There you are Tilla. They told me you might be out here.”

“Sundown?” Tilla stands and shakes the offered hand, blinking and grinning. “Stone the crows. It’s been...”

“Eight years Tilla. I’m gonna get a beer. Want one?”

“Yeah mate. But... Whitefella not s’posed to drink here.” Alistair laughs. “That’s bullshit.”

They sit on the bench, their shoulders occasionally brushing. Two big brown bottles of Colonial Ale stand in the trampled dirt at their feet.

“Da died Tilla. Heart attack. Just before Christmas.”

“Oh no.” Tilla shakes his head, breathes with the weight of it, feels Alistair breathing next to him. “I’m real sorry mate. He was a good man. True.”

“True. Him and the superintendent at Poonindie were good men and that’s why they kicked them out. Da wanted me to stay at university, but my heart’s not in it. Can’t stop thinking I want to have a look around out there.” He waves a freckled arm in the general direction of north. “Good sheep country out there. Saltbush grows beautiful wool they say. The government are sinking wells, digging dams, trying to get things moving. They want people to have a go.”

“Mmmm. Apparently that country is my country, er, where my people are from, that way. But I was born at Poonindie.”

In unison they pick up their beers and take a long swig.

Alistair wipes his mouth with the back of a hand. “Well. S’posedly my people are from Orkney, and that’s a hell of a way from here. We’re all people just the same.”

“True.”

“Thing is Tilla. D’ya want to come with me?”

See what we can find?” *We*. He said *we*.

“Alright.”

**LITERARY DEVICES: ALLITERATION**  
Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words that are in close proximity to each other

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