

The Boy in the Dunes
By Marie McLean (2024)

At first, his dreams are hazy. Hard to grasp once the day begins. Mere embers of an ancient dance. Feet pounding dirt under the night sky in tune to ominous vocal chants and the clacking of sticks. Naked bodies, smeared in white, wheel around a ceremonial fire as a headless man emerges from the shadows. A severed head is cradled in his arms.

Eric Edgar Cooke sits bolt upright, frantically scanning his cramped cell. The door is shut solid, and as the muffled voices of the prison screws filter in from the corridor, he remembers where he is. A chain rattles then a key slides into his lock. He braces himself at the sound of his name and forces the muscles of his face to relax. He can't let them see what this place is doing to him.

He's brought Armageddon to sleepy Perth, waking it up. Changing it forever. The days until his execution drag by and he fears sleep more than death, but his body betrays him. As the late afternoon light slants through the bars of the high, narrow window, he dozes. Dust motes morph into souls from the underworld, and three women lean over him, arms folded tight beneath bosoms that strain against high-necked blouses. Hair pulled back into severe buns. Dull, woollen skirts brush his legs, and Eric lies frozen on the grey, coarse blanket of his lumpy cot, staring into faces overflowing with scorn. The hags are legend. Stories of their hangings snake and slither around the prison and the women sneak into death row nightmares, spitting venom on those who are next.

As his turn draws closer, the dreams become more vivid. On waking, ghosts linger, sticking to him like dried blood, crowding his cell. His ears ring with their taunts. On Sunday, he receives his last cooked meal and is delivered his worst dream yet.

He stands alone, facing the Fremantle Round House, hypnotised by the light of the full moon bouncing off the limestone blocks. Oil lamps light dual staircases that rise above the whaling tunnel—an archway into darkness—and the wind whips up dust from the dirt road. The putrid smell of rotting whale carcass invades his nose and lines his throat. In the distance, native dogs howl and horses nearby whinny in response. His eyes adjust to the night, and he's drawn to the crude, wooden gallows at the foot of the Round House. As he glides around the contraption his chest tightens, and he can hardly breathe. Can hardly look away. He moves beyond the gallows to fields of dunes, stopping where the sand has been disturbed. Close to shore, a sailing ship lists in wavy slivers of reflected gold. Its bare masts, giant crucifixes.

'They forgot me, they 'ave, 'a voice says and Eric spins around. A pale, skinny boy, no more than fifteen, stares into a deep, sandy pit. His head is misshapen, ugly. Big as a balloon at the back, but narrow at the forehead. Almost too heavy for his puny, rope-burned neck. Eric follows the boy's gaze and peers into the hole. Inside is a stained canvas shroud, somehow luminescent.

Eric tries to speak, but his mouth is dry. His words won't come.

'I was first, I was. But none knows 'oo I am.' The boy looks up. 'You,' he says as he drifts towards Eric, pointing a small, bony finger. 'You, they'll 'member fer'ever.'

The boy hovers over the abyss, dressed in rags, feet bare. 'I dint deserve what they done to me. It's me 'ead. It makes me do things. I dint mean what I did to George. His ma, Missus Pollard, she said I was the devil. But you're the devil. I know what you done. And they'll put you in an 'ole too, with that last woman who 'anged.' He laughs. 'Two fer one.'

Eric wakes, sweating. His execution team is ready for him. At the gallows, the hangman places a hood over his head, and seconds before the trap door lever is pulled, Eric has one last vision.

Waiting in the space below is the boy from the dunes. 'I'm John,' he says. 'John Gavin,' and he gives Eric a salute. A child-like hand, canted against an unforgettable forehead.

Word Count: 710