

## Young Writers Award - 2000 winner

### Motorbike Man by Rhianna Boyle

Noela once did a backwards somersault off the raft in their dam and spun around so many times under water she forgot which way was up. The clay in the water gave it the texture of dirty milk, and no sunlight could penetrate to tell her which way to swim. She could taste mud on the back of her throat, and knew the lights flashing across her eyelids were tricks played by her own skull and could not be trusted.

Then, just as her lungs began to ache and she knew the water had got her, she felt the warmth of the sun on her skin, and she found she had floated to the surface in spite of herself. She felt for the boards of the raft and hung from the edge, coughing.

"Are you alright, Noela?" said her brother.

She spat some water down her chin.

"I thought you must've drowned," said Katherine, eager to share in any trauma.

"Does it hurt, did it go up your nose?"

But Noela didn't answer because on the bank behind Katherine she had seen the motorbike. It lay on its side in the dirt; a big, black machine, the glossy paint dulled only slightly by the dust from the road. The headlight had shattered and pieces of it were scattered in the grass.

They were used to finding vehicles abandoned in the bush. In the middle of some whispered saga, wearing tunics made from feedsacks, they would wander across a rusty car in the lantana along the roadside. Some had been crashed, most had been dumped there, stolen or just worn out. Katherine, who was the oldest and made up these games, would turn them into the bodies of monsters, the broken glass from their windscreens into jewels. Their seats smelled of desperation and mildew.

They had never come across a motorbike before. Someone must have pushed it over the edge of the road, Noela thought, and it had rolled down the slope. The others had seen it now too and were paddling the raft over to the bank. Because she had seen it first, Noela was excused from paddling and lay belly-down on the raft, watching the bank drift towards her.

They gathered around the motorbike, their togs still dripping. They could ride it, Noela's brother suggested, circling in the dust with a pair of invisible handlebars and a spitty burble of engine noises. But when none of them rushed forward to carry out his plan he stopped revving and stood still. They were afraid to touch it. Noela saw the four of them reflected in the fuel tank. They looked much smaller, and the sky was huge and grey.

Fiona found a packet of cigarettes lying on the ground. There were seven left inside.

"Let's smoke them," she said.

"You," said Noela's brother.

She pulled one out and twisted it in her fingers as she tried to find the right end.

"Don't," said Katherine. "You'll get cancer."

Fiona put the cigarette in her mouth. She held it in the middle, Noela noticed, like a straw, not at the side of her mouth like you should.

"You have to light them," said Noela.

"So. I can still smoke them like this."

Fiona gave them all one, except for Katherine who pushed her away. Noela put hers in her mouth and sucked it. No smoke came from the end. After a while there was a bitter taste and it started to go soggy. They spat the cigarettes into the water. Fiona tipped the whole packet in and they bobbed around in a clump near the bank, a little flotilla drifting out to sea.

Soon the others got bored and pushed the raft back out into the water. Noela sat down on the bank, a safe distance from the motorbike. The headlight looked a big eye. She looked down at her arms and legs, the mosquito bites and waterlogged bandaids. The dam was so thick and brown with clay that the particles clung to your body and showed up all the little hairs you couldn't usually see. Noela rubbed at them, and there was her skin, bald and back to normal again.

The water on the surface of the dam seemed calm and warm, but there were things underneath that were strange and terrifying, and when you lost your way on the bottom you could feel them choking your lungs. Underneath everything ordinary there was something terrible. Even her own body was like that. She liked it the way it was now, flat and skinny; but she knew that even though she owned it she could not control it. She could not stop it from changing. Her mum got her a book about it and left it on the end of Noela's bed, but Noela couldn't read it. She'd peek at a page very quickly and slam it shut before she had time to remember what she'd read. They were adults' secrets, the things in that book, and when she thought about them they made her feel so sad she could hardly move.

The others had paddled out into the deep part and were jumping off again. Noela's brother stood on the edge of the raft, tensed to jump.

"Watch me," he called to her.

"I am watching," she said.

She trailed her hand through the water, catching strings of mucus-slippery toad eggs. If you looked closely you could see baby tadpoles shifting and spinning in little black balls. Noela pulled the eggs out of the water and draped them in the dirt on the bank. When the sun got to them the slippery bit would dry in flaky silver trails. It looked like snot. That made her feel sad too, seeing the tadpoles all dead and dried up. She always promised herself she wouldn't do it again, but every time they came back to the dam she still did.

Out on the raft they had stopped jumping. There was a dead smell in the air. Noela hadn't noticed it before, but the wind had got up and they had to bunch their nostrils against it. It was coming from behind the opposite bank, where the dam wall rose then fell away into the gully below.

The smell of death, like the smell of old cars, was familiar to them, especially after rain. Animals were crushed in knot holes, and baby birds blew out of nests. Out in the bush they would find a bundle of claws and rotting fur, or smashed eggshells, but mostly they could find only the smell, and sometimes, months later, a fragment of bleached bone.

"Someone should go and see what it is," said Katherine.

Noela's brother got off the raft. Noela watched his blue togs disappear over the crest of the bank. After a while she got up and swam back to the raft. The motorbike was making her uneasy.

Her brother came back from looking and slid into the water like a stick. When he got to the raft he sat right next to her and tried to huddle under her armpit.

"What is it?" said Katherine.

"Nothing." He had a slug of snot glistening at one nostril.

"Tell us. You have to."

"Shut up," he said, angry now. "It's just nothing."

Noela knew what had to be done. He was her brother, so she had to be the one. She grabbed his arm and twisted the flesh.

"I'll give you a Chinese burn." She twisted harder.

"Fuck off." She was surprised to hear his voice waver. He wasn't just whingeing any more, but really crying. Noela hadn't expected this. She let go of his arm. Katherine and Fiona were silent, staring at him. The sun was hot on their faces.

"I wasn't trying to really hurt you," said Noela. She put her arm around him and pulled him in to her chest, the way she had when he was little.

"Fuck off," he said. He pushed her arm away.

"One of us will have to go," said Katherine.

Fiona went to look. Noela's brother was still crying next to her, little sucking breaths that he couldn't stop. Sometimes she hated him, then other times she thought she loved him more than anyone, even her mum and dad. But she always ended up doing something to hurt him.

"There's a dead man down there," said Fiona, standing on the crest. They never knew when to believe her. There's buried treasure here, she'd said once, I saw it shining, and they'd spent hours digging up the road to find a bit of old beer bottle. Sometimes she said things that could never have been true. There's a turtle down our plughole that talks to me. Just pretending.

"He's got ants coming out of his head."

Katherine slid off the raft. Her ripples clapped against the bank. Noela shut her eyes and willed them to stop.

"Don't," said Noela's brother, but Katherine was already gone. It didn't seem safe without her. She hit them sometimes, bossed them around, but they had an unspoken convention that nothing could go wrong when she was around. The bush only seemed empty when she wasn't there.

Noela and her brother got into the water and followed her up the bank. The smell was stronger as they neared the top. Katherine picked up a stick. She held it like a sword and whipped it against the ground. Pieces of rock bounced down the slope and into the water.

It seemed to Noela that the noise of the cicadas all around them was getting louder and louder. She wanted to go home, wrap herself in her towel and watch the cartoons. They'd be starting soon and if she didn't get back she'd miss them.

"I don't want to do this any more," she said. "It's stupid."

"You have to," said Katherine. She started walking again. "Follow me. If anything happens I'll give a signal."

She was whispering, going into an American accent the way she did in games. They followed her. At the top of the crest they looked down, and there was the dead man. He was lying face down at the bottom of the slope, just where the kangaroo grass started. There wasn't much blood, Noela thought. She had expected it to be gory, the ground stained red and intestines spread out like with the sheep she'd once seen butchered. But there was only a dark dried gash on the side of his head, and a line of brown ants going into one ear.

"Told you," said Fiona.

The man was wearing jeans and a red flannelette shirt, with his hair in ponytail. He was younger than Noela had expected. He might have been one of high school kids who hung around in the town, but she didn't recognise him.

Nobody wanted to cry, not even Noela's brother, who had stopped sniffing. If they cried the man might get them. A car went past up on the road.

"Somebody should throw a rock at him," said Noela.

Fiona sifted through the dirt and found one. She threw it down the slope but it missed and landed in the grass. Then they all tried, scooping up handfuls of gravel and hurling them at the man. They never knew whose rock it was that hit him, but it struck his back with a noise like a drum and rolled off into the dust.

It was the rock that finally made them panic. Dead men were so alien to them they hardly knew what to think, but they were intimately familiar with stone and the way it stung your flesh. It was their weapon in petty disputes. They were terrified most not by the fact that he was dead but by the way he could lie there and not be hurt by the rock on his back.

They slid down the bank, wading through the mud around the shore. When they reached the road they started running. When Noela was older she would wake up from this moment in her dreams and wonder why they hadn't told. They kept the dead man a secret, and left him there to gather more insects until the police found him two days later.

It might, she thought, have been the strange sense of guilt they felt. Until they found him his death was unknown to the world beyond the ants, and it was as if in discovering him they had brought it into existence. They had thrown rocks at him and tasted the bitterness of his cigarettes. Or it could have been that telling would remove him from their world of imaginary horrors and monsters and make them admit he was real. In the end Noela thought it was just because she didn't know how to tell anyone. She talked to her mum about school and her cat and what was for tea, not about blood and dead men. She didn't have the right words. Explaining it would have been exhausting.

Noela saw the trees blur past them as she ran. She had a cramp in her side. She knew now what had happened at the bottom of the dam. She really had drowned, and the girl who had swum to the surface was a new, different girl. The others must have drowned with her because they were all different too now. They had seen the Motorbike Man.

They slowed down when they reached Noela's driveway. Her mother had put glasses of cordial on the verandah table for them. The television was on and Noela could hear chirpy mouse voices singing. Her mother smiled at them.

"So," she said, "Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes thank you," said Noela, breathless.

They all stared at the ground.