

2018 Young Writers Award

Runner up 18-25

Red Gum

by Chloe Mark

She's met a lot of dead things on her morning walks down past the dam. Since moving out to the property, sights that would have once made her cringe and call for Matthew now give her no pause. She pauses now. The cat is pinned to the trunk of the gum by a screwdriver through its neck.

'Cut it out, Champ,' she snaps at the dog nosing in the trails of blood among the roots. The blood is wet, couldn't have been up their long.

'Did one of you do this?' she asks her boys. Ben, 16, broad and earnest shakes his head and looks to his brothers. Noah turned 14 just last month. He holds the body with a hand wrapped in a plastic bag and wrenches the screwdriver out. It was his cat more than anyone's.. Sam, the baby at just 10 and never allowed to forget it, is the only one who cries. But not, Delilah thinks to herself, guiltily. His brothers don't prod him or laugh, but seem embarrassed by his tears, pretending they don't see.

'We didn't do it, Mum,' Ben speaks for the three, and she believes it. For most of their lives they'd lived on this farm and grown with the animals as they had each other. They were rowdy boys, for certain, especially Noah, but they were each of them soft in their way. They march up the bank, a funeral procession. She looks across the yard to the neighbouring plot of land. Her eye lands, drawn as if by the focal point of an oil painting, to the silhouette of John Murphy. Against the morning sun he is a burnt match of a man, tall and gnarled and grey. He is standing still, facing their yard. Though she can't make out his eyes to see where his gaze rests, she feels it on her skin. The image of the cat christened against the timber darkens her mind and she's grateful her sons walk ahead so they can't see her fear. From the corner of her eye, she sees Murphy move, reanimated, and ghost their movements up the hill. Their properties were part of a failed development plan to encourage growth in the area. Both houses sit 100 metres back from the dirt road. At the back of the garden is a

fence and gate that opens onto their stretch of land. It's a clear slope that plateaus into a bank of gums so you can't see where your plot ends. Their properties mirror each other.

Their land should technically be the same, their houses too. But the Murphy's always seems still, suspended in time. She'd only ever visited it once, eight years earlier, when they'd first moved in.

'Thank God,' she'd said, 'we aren't totally isolated.'

'We should introduce ourselves,' Said Matthew, 'Show some classic country hospitality.' Now she almost wishes they were completely alone out here.

'We' became 'she' one day when Matthew was at work and Ben and Noah at school. With Sam on her hip she'd walked down the mirrored driveway. She was born and raised in Brisbane and knew nothing about country hospitality, but she'd meant to invite the Murphy's over for dinner. The invitation died on her tongue when the door opened. A young man, snarled like an old tree answered the door and stared at her silently.

'Hello,' she'd said, just to break the silence, 'I'm Delilah, we moved in next door and-'
'August!'

She could see, behind the man, the foyer was identical in structure to her own. And just beyond it sat a giant woman packed into an armchair.

'August shut the damn door and -'

The man didn't look away as he swung the door shut in her face. She left feeling as though a layer of grease had settled over her skin and thought for days about the inside of that house, the twin of her own. She hadn't ever gone back.

They bury BC that afternoon, when the boys get home from school. It was strange, seeing them all so solemn and so still. In eight years, they've come to be the keepers of a veritable animal cemetery, on the far side of the grove: countless cats, a dog or two, and a horse.

'It was probably one of the boys' friends playing some kind of prank. Probably one of Noah's,' Matthew's voice is little comfort to her down the phone line. All static.

'What kind of prank is mutilating a cat?'

'Well what reason would the neighbour have to do it?'

'Because that's what he does, Matthew, he kills things for a living,' she breathes frustration down the line at him and it crackles back at her.

'Yes Delilah, for a living. You've always had it out for that man, ever since we got here. He's just people like us trying to get by.'

People like us, she thinks.

‘No,’ she says firmly, ‘there’s something off about him, about that whole place.’

She adds, ‘Maybe you’d know what I mean if you were ever here.’

He is silent long enough for her to know he got her message, loud and clear. She feels like a little girl waiting to be chastised.

‘Why don’t you bring the gun up from the shed? I’ve been telling you since I got this job that you should have it in the house while I’m on the road.’

She hangs up, feeling no safer than when she’d dialled the phone. She looks out the tall windows into the blackness but only sees her own reflection. She imagines seeing a figure in the reflection behind her. What would she do if she turned around and someone was really there? What good would a gun do her? What would she do with someone on the other end of her barrel, shoot them? She doesn’t think so.

The Murphy’s have a gun, one at least. They raise pigs for slaughter and still use a shotgun through the eye. They have their own slaughterhouse at the bottom end of their land so when they are killed, the screams of the animals can’t be heard from the hill. But the cracks of the gun echo through the trees at dawn during slaughter season. The first reaping for the year was only a few days ago. She’s in the habit of sitting by the fence that separates the garden from the paddock, drinking her coffee and having a smoke, waiting to hear the first shot of the morning ring out before she heads down for her walk with the dogs. The starting gun for her day.

The grass is still wet with dew, but her Levi’s are not especially nice anymore, and besides, no one around here’s looking. Murphy, she knows, is somewhere in that bush. He’s among the squat, metal buildings down the back. He doesn’t so much walk, not with the same proud stride her husband has. He slinks, he shimmers and wriggles against the sky like an oil slick on a hot road. Murphy, she knows, is probably standing over an animal right now, blind to its wild eyes and deaf to its screaming.

She can make out the roof of the tin slaughterhouse from her stoop and to her it seems to pulse like the slow-beating heart of a dying thing. She imagines that inside, its walls are red and wet. And it beats steadily slower and slower.

The hollow crack reaches her ears and she rises. The dogs skip eagerly around her thighs and she opens the latch gate to let them into the field but she doesn’t step through it. She turns around and heads back to the house, leaving Champ and Coda torn by the gate.

The boys take wildflowers down to the grave every afternoon for a week. They surprise her with their tenderness sometimes. She'd often worried that Matthew's hard hand would shape them into bitter boys.

'It's a cat,' he would have said if he were here to see their mourning, 'It doesn't need flowers, it's dead.'

She is glad for his absence sometimes. When he calls at night, she doesn't mention Murphy and he doesn't ask. She lies and tells him she keeps the gun locked in their wardrobe now. Funny, she thinks, how she's the one putting him at ease.

She keeps an eye to the bush out back but hasn't gone for her walk in days. Coda and Champ are now used to the ritual of going without her, always wandering back up after an hour or so to find her still sitting in her patch of grass, cigarette burnt down and coffee gone cold.

Ben and Noah, as though in secret alliance, pick up the work in the paddock that she's started to neglect. They get up before the sun to let the chickens out and feed the sheep, and they stay out late after school working the land and tending to her vegetables. She spends hours every afternoon cooking special meals for dinner as thanks.

'Thanks mum,' they say, each planting a kiss on her cheek, 'delicious.'

Sam is the only one to mention how clean the house is, how unlike her to cook something other than sausages and mash. Noah elbows him roughly. They must think she's gone mad.

It took her a long time to feel like this place was hers, but now she isn't sure it ever was. It doesn't breathe like it used to, doesn't move like she remembers. She remembers: the blood stain on the gum tree and the blood stain on Murphy's hand when it held hers. The space between the gums feels smaller, the air is packed tighter.

The wild seems to crawl further up the hill toward the house every day.

She's hanging clothes on the line by the back of the house when she spots John heading back home after his morning's work. The image of this tin heart never leaves her. It sits at the base of her skull with the image of the mutilated cat. She thinks of Ben's stoicism, Noah's dignity, and Sam's tearful eyes. And she thinks of the pigs, of the cat.

She leaves the basket half full and heads through the back gate before her confidence can falter. Her resentment burns in her chest but could be snuffed out at any moment.

'Hey!' she calls out when she's within 50 metres of the fence that separates their lives. He looks up and slinks toward her. Both stop a few paces away from the wire, a no-man's land. He's not wearing his plastic apron or thick gloves but she can smell the metallic tang of blood on him. Death is in his pores. It oozes from him like sweat.

‘Hey, we found our cat last week,’ she turns and points down toward her dam, ‘Pinned to a tree with a screwdriver in his neck.’

John looks past her to where she points. She notices a slash of red on his chin, a streak of blood.

‘You’ve got...’ she gestures at her own chin and he understands. He wipes his hand across his face, inspects the blood there.

The first time she’d met him, over the fence, much like this, he’d had blood on his hands. She didn’t notice until she shook one and her hand came away red. She’d yelped, and he’d laughed. Sam, still a baby then, had started crying and she’d picked him up and hurried away, leaving crimson handprints all over her son.

‘Your cat,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry to hear about him. Big black one, right? Feral.’

His voice is a croak, is a crackle, that seems to come from his chest and not his mouth at all.

‘You didn’t see anyone in our yard, did you?’ she presses. His eyes are milky grey and hard like marble.

‘I saw you all,’ he says, ignoring her question, ‘Ben and Noah and Sam all...huddled around.’

She wonders if she ever mentioned her sons’ names, if maybe Matthew had sometime.

‘That little one, he’s a softy isn’t he,’ his mouth splits into a smile and he examines the blood in his palm.

‘Bit old to be sleeping with a night-light don’t you think?’ he asks, looking back up at her.

His eyes burn the skin on the back of her neck as she walks away.

She pauses at her own back door, half believing that she’ll step inside and he’ll be there. She stands in her own home, paralysed. She doesn’t recognise these walls anymore. It’s as though she stepped through a mirror, into a house that looked like hers but wasn’t the same somehow. It had been handled by someone else – soiled.

She is paralysed by the image of Murphy lying unseen somewhere in her home. He is in here somewhere, she knows, he is in the walls. She doesn’t move until she hears the kids’ shouts from the road, afraid that as soon as she moves, so too will he, shadowing her movements. If she stays still, he won’t be able to move.

‘I’m sorry, boys,’ she says, ‘I didn’t have time to do anything for dinner.’

She doesn’t miss the look between them.

The next morning, the air is still and quiet. Must have run out of pigs to slaughter, she thinks. And just like that, she feels an uncoiling happen inside her stomach. She doesn't hesitate in stepping through the back gate into the paddock. She passed Ben and Noah at the shed, loading up on feed to do their morning round. On her approach the dogs stand up, wagging their tails excitedly.

'Thank you,' she says, bending down to scratch Champ's throat, 'I'll take back over with this tomorrow morning.'

She watches her sons disappear into the gums and sits down in the wet grass by the water. When she eventually rises, and turns back toward the yard, thoughts of breakfast on her mind, she notices a figure by the gate. She raises a hand to wave, assuming it must be Sam looking for her, but stops short, when she realises how tall it is. She looks back over her shoulder toward the trees and sees no sign of the boys on their way back.

Her mind stumbles over itself and she realises her only option is to continue up the hill toward the person. Though unsurprised, when she realises it's Murphy, a cold hand grabs her heart. She doesn't stop, but keeps walking, calmly. As she gets closer, she sees his apron, stained brown with blood. At first glance, she thought he was wearing his red rubber gloves, but realises now that his arms are bare, but stained to the elbow in blood.

No gunshots, she reminds herself. The coil in her guts tightens to almost snapping.