

Young Writers Award - 2001 runner up

The Mango Tree by Romy Ash

My childhood was a mango tree; nothing else grew there. The backyard was shaded and there was nowhere else to play. Other yards had grass and flowers in flowerbeds. My bed was in my room, my room with the window that if left open leaves would blow in. Branches so close they reached their hands in through the window and if I closed it they would tap against the glass. I worried that they would grow while I was asleep and when I woke there would be nothing but tree. Some nights I left it open just to see.

I could have broken the branch off, but I knew that trees bled. My father had climbed (when he used to smile) and built me a tree house. Nails drawing blood like a crucifixion. He had wanted a boy who would have built one himself. I cried and told no one why. The skeleton of the tree house hobbled by nails, still clung, grasping at the branches, it hung. I liked to sit beneath it, so if it ever fell it would fall on me. Sometimes a leaf would fall and startle me in contemplation and I'd wonder for a moment that death was so light.

I could have played on the front pavement, but it was always so bright and my skin so pale. I was used to sun that fell in drops soaking into the ground. Cement sparkled and the bitumen in the heat looked like something melting and unreal. I didn't play with other kids. I would turn my head away when they talked to me, hiding behind my hair and looking out only to catch a glimpse of their retreating backs. I would play hide and seek with myself and forget to find me.

In summer fruit would add to the tree's burden, weighting the branches down so heavily the mangoes almost rested on the ground. The bats would come and the fruit would fall and rot on the ground. Fruit flies swarming like a second shadow. I would climb the tree to get away from the sticky touch of the earth beneath my bare feet, and search for a mango that was still whole and perfect. I would stand on the fragile planks of the tree house and wait for it to break, but I was too light.

At the very top was a breeze and it floated hot against my skin. I was sweating even then. I could always smell dust and barbeques and hear the mumbled conversations of women hanging out washing. People used to sing, I'd hear them.

Between the leaves I could frame small sections of other peoples' yards, but I could never see the whole. Dismembered limbs of the neighbour sun baking. Just her legs, alone and unmoving, painted nails fairy floss pink. A hills hoist crisscrossing the lazy air like a cage, and cats peering like me between leaves.

I could stay there all day hungry and holding in a wee, my legs cramping, the bark making patterns on my skin. I was never brave enough to stay until dark but I'd wait until the sun burnt the top of the tree and disappeared leaving the echo of its light to light my way. My father had built steps into the side of the trunk but climbing down I always jumped. Holding my breath I stepped and every time I expected to crumple like a rag doll. My feet would sting but the soft earth cushioned my fall. One night I pretended that something had gone wrong and I lay with my face pressed against the pungent dirt and waited. My legs curled uncomfortably like twisted roots for effect. I waited even though I knew no one would look. He wouldn't notice until long after dark.

Our house was empty, rooms echoing each other's silence. The floorboards talked and the tree listened but when I walked I walked softly. My feet treading a path that I knew wouldn't creak or laugh. I walked like nothing. The bathroom was the only room that betrayed my presence. I hated the bathroom and baths. The water stripping my second skin, my protection.

The taps coughed uncomfortably before offering any water and the toilet hissed and shuddered in protest. I'd run and hide like the toilet was looking for me, like it could lift its cisterns and run, its lid banging, water dripping like saliva from its mouth.

I would hide behind the curtains with their faded leaf pattern waiting until my heart beat normally. I'd wait and sometimes, I would fall asleep awaking cold and damp beneath an open window. Leaves blown scattered like me to the floor. I never remembered falling. My mother made curtains but they were old before my mother who lived in a photograph creased and folded in my father's wallet. I can't remember her touch. She is the scent of lavender and dust.

My father is sawdust and smoke. He smells of wood and leaf consumed and altered. I could always hear him beneath my feet, beneath the floorboards that creaked. His whistle, his saw, tools hanging from the walls like instruments of torture. A bare light bulb dulled by layers of sawdust hanging above his lowered head like an idea long forgotten. Caressing the grain with a fine sandpaper hand until it was as smooth as skin.

The mango tree didn't lose leaves in winter, not like the frangipani that smiled white and yellow flowers all summer over the front verandah. In winter it dropped its leaves in mourning for their loss. It always looked all embarrassed and awkward and sad. It bled white tears if you broke a leaf off before it was ready to fall, and the tears were poisonous.

He didn't like the frangipani, said it wasn't a tree, it just pretended to be. You couldn't use the wood, it was soft and flimsy, he said. When no one was looking I put the flowers in my hair, behind my ear. Or I took them to the top of the mango tree, you couldn't really climb a frangipani, they were too fragile to hold much weight and anyway they weren't tall enough. I let the flowers fall twirling like dancers to the ground. They landed softly unhurt, uncrushed, and whole. I could collect them and drop them all again and they would still be okay, too heavy to float but too light to be hurt. He said a frangipani was a glorified bush. I always said nothing, hiding my face behind my fringe like the frangipani hid the front windows of the house, and the mango tree the back. It was dark inside the house; it was difficult for the sun to get past the layers of leaves in its path. The workroom was dark, where he worked and which for me was out of bounds.

I didn't touch anything. I barely breathed enough breath to disturb the dust. Stumbling against discarded off cuts. The floor littered with shavings like peeling skin, some flat and opaque, some long and thin, curling like ringlets of pale hair. Like my hair. Knobs of wood like knuckles, broken fingers and twisted limbs swept into corners and forgotten. The back of the room was dark and indistinct and as I walked further in I comforted myself with the thought that I had left my footprints like breadcrumbs in the forest. I just wanted to borrow one thing.

Humming to myself. The bow won't break and I'll cradle myself in the treetop. I walked further into the dark under the house. Listening to my fathers footsteps like my heartbeat on the floor above. I could hear his footsteps dulled by the linoleum on the kitchen floor. I wondered when I walked above, could he hear me, my treading so softly. My hand pale almost glowing in the dull light found a chisel, everything had its spot. It was cold and sharp. The space where it had been glared empty at me. It was heavy.

In the silence between his steps I held my breath and my heart stopped. My heart beat. He beat me. He hit me. I hit the ground, my body stinging as I sunk through the earth. Rotting like fruit in the pungent dirt. I had fallen. I closed my eyes and hoped when I opened them it would all be different. It was dark with them closed and it was dark with them open. I beat him to an apology and said sorry. The workroom was out of bounds and I was of course, naughty. Contorting myself out of his attempted embrace I walked, hiding the chisel and trying to follow my footsteps that had been obliterated by his entrance.

The day had closed its eyes like mine. It was almost dark as I walked to the base of the tree and climbed up. The bark was rough under my hands and feet and my skirt billowed around me like a parachute. In the dark I could barely see each branch but I knew the way by touch to the top.

I could smell other people's cooking and I could hear the next-door neighbour calling her children in for dinner. I knew their names, Tom and Jessica and that Tom pulled Jessica's hair and called

her names when he wasn't near their mother. Jessica cried and told no one why, but I believed her.

The sky turned from red to dark blue to black, then the stars came out, and I wished on the first star I saw that night. In storms the tree would shake and cry scratching its fingers against my bedroom window desperate to be let in out of the wind but I was always too scared to open the window. I would emerge in the morning expecting to see nothing left but broken pieces and roots wrenched from the earth, but the tree was always there and I always felt relieved but somehow cheated. I wished that the bow would break.

No one called me in for dinner. I could see the house crouching in the dark, the roof huddling over the verandah. The only light came from the under the workroom door. I wondered if he noticed the absence of the sound of my footsteps on the floor above him or if he had ever noticed them at all. My mother would have worn heels her feet tap tapping her presence to him. As he worked he could have followed her around the house above him. He would notice the chisel was missing, not me.

A chisel requires a hammer to function properly but it was sharp and this was enough. I could feel a trickle of blood that had run from my nose drying but I didn't wipe it off. My hands were sticky with blood as I cut the bark. Carefully spelling my past. My name in blood, dripping like my tears down the branch. I wouldn't last forever. Eventually the bark would heal itself and grow over me.

If I had fallen asleep I would have fallen. I wondered would I wake before I hit the earth or would I pass from one sleeping state to another, dreaming my death. If I jumped was I light enough to live? Would I twirl like a flower or fall with the soft thud of a mango splitting open? Standing I could see street lights like a path of overly bright stars and beneath each a small pool of the street illuminated, but as I climbed down, careful not to slip I feared I was stuck in the dark place in between lights. I let the chisel fall before me and it twisted heavily, hitting branches and cutting into the earth.

I didn't have to touch the ground to reach my room and I climbed from the branch through my window treading lightly to the floor. I didn't make a sound and did not fall to pieces or crumple like a rag doll. I landed whole.