

This here land

The sound woke him.

Too vulnerable to be a howling dingo, it was more like the solemn cry of an owl. Or, he thought, a ghost haunting the trees.

If he'd been familiar with grief's melody, if he'd known how much someone sobbing, someone in pain, could sound like wild dogs and nocturnal birds, he would have slid out of bed and gone to see what was wrong. But he was too young to know that. So, as he lay beneath the tangled web of shadows cast by ancient red gums, the rhythmic hymn of his mother's heartbreak soothed him and sent him back to sleep.

Golden light pierced his window and glowed red under his eyelids evoking fleeting dreams of ancient bush fires before he woke with a start to *creak creak thwack!* He knew that sound – the screen door slamming. And another. *Tick tick tick:* the tin roof slowing heating up like baking clay. Outside, the kookaburras harmonised with his home's morning song.

In winter he would hear the river's wild whispering, too.

But now it was only a trickle.

He slithered from his light covers, a snake shedding its skin, and padded across his bedroom. He crept along the hallway carpet and stopped outside his mum's room. The door stood open: just a nest of tangled sheets – and a smell. Something old, like earth.

“Mum?” he called.

Into the kitchen he wandered, bare feet sticking to the vinyl floor, and there was a man holding out a bowl of cereal in a hand as dark and knotted as an old tree root.

“Jarrah!” the boy said, and smiled through half sleeping eyes.

The man's frog-like mouth grew as wide as his broad brown nose. A scraggly beard, white like a seagull's breast, turned his few teeth yellow in contrast.

“G'day matey.”

The boy reached out for the plastic bowl and took it to the kitchen table. He pulled himself up onto a cracked padded seat that was already warm from the sun slanting through the bay window. Jarrah followed, sighed and sank down opposite him.

“Where's mum?” the boy asked through a muffled mouthful, the crunch of Coco Pops in his

ears.

Jarraah leaned forward until his faded checked shirt bulged both over and under the table's edge. "Well Sam," he said. "Ya mum's gonna be out mosta the day so I'm looking afta ya. She told me we could watch TV and eat junk food and do whatever we want." Jarraah winked a shiny beetle eye. "Whaddya think about that aye?"

"Okay," Sam paused, spoon mid-air. "Where is she?"

Jarraah stroked the back of his thick neck. "She's..." his brow furrowed, "She's doing mum's business son and that's all I'm fit ta tell ya."

Sam liked his neighbour. Jarraah looked after him a lot since his dad left For Good a few months back, whenever his mum worked late or went into town. Even though he wasn't his dad, his mum said he still had to listen to Jarraah and do what he said. Sam had asked why and Jarraah had said because he was old and wise, that's why, but he'd said it with a smile and he hardly ever told Sam what to do anyway.

Sam's eyes wandered around the small kitchen and living room. Past the record player with the bent arm that warped songs as if they were under water, past the jammed open window that invited in the gentle smell of wattles, past the fridge, colourful with photos and magnets from his mum's wanderings around Australia. His eyes lingered on the photo stuck there at his head height, the one his mum had brought home a few weeks ago, and his stomach gave an excited jolt. Then Sam's gaze found what he was searching for.

Jarraah's guitar leant against a stack of his dad's old surfing magazines.

Orange and yellow dots of paint danced all over the shiny brown wood in circles and lines. It reminded Sam of an ant's nest he'd once stepped on in the bush just beyond their backyard. The burnished creatures streamed out of their crumbling home, making frantic patterns in the dark dirt.

"You gonna play later?" Sam asked.

"I sure am, matey. If ya want me to."

Sam drained the muddy milk from his bowl and placed it down, then he slid off his seat and

strolled over to the pantry. He grabbed the cereal box before glancing back at Jarrah.

“Go for it,” Jarrah said.

Sam watched cartoons on the boxy TV for a few hours more than he was usually allowed. If you sat cross-legged in the far corner of the sagging couch and didn't cough there was almost no static, just a breath of dandelion seeds across the screen. Every now and then he had to get up and turn the volume dial as the cicada's chirping grew to a steady midday whine.

After a while Jarrah left then came back. He held a huge, sagging white package in his arms like a baby. And it's not even Sunday, Sam thought. The package sighed a salty steam when the pair ripped it open and spread it on the living room floor and Sam poured a great lake of tomato sauce on the grease-splodged butcher paper. They ate, sucking in air like dying fish to cool each mouthful, and Sam told Jarrah about his favourite cartoons.

“Hey!” Sam said after a while as his hand shot out over the sodden pile of potato in his corner of the paper. He and his mum could never finish the large serve but with Jarrah he had to fight for the last chip. “Get out of it!” he said.

Jarrah stole one anyway and laughed from his throat. “More of me ta feed, matey.”

“That's not sharing, Jarrah!” Sam said. “Mum said I gotta learn to share now.”

Jarrah's smile faded and he let Sam finish. Sam watched him slide the white plastic sunglasses out of his wiry hair and dip the arm in the sauce and dot the paper red like mosquito bites. Then he drew a long wavy line until the sauce ran out.

“Hows about a little bush walk? It'll be cooler out there under those trees.”

Sam wasn't too hot but he saw Jarrah's nose was shiny with sweat so he said, “Okay.”

The pair crossed the grass, brown patches like rust, and entered the whisper of shade beneath the trees. Jarrah's feet were bare but Sam wore white sand shoes. The bush reacted to their presences with the usual scuttling and slithering and swooping of bugs and lizards and birds. Streamers of dead bark shed by eucalyptus trees littered the land. They left behind pastel-coloured stripes, finger painting on the trunks. Wattle and bottlebrush, suspended in mid-explosion all around them, bathed the bush in a sweet musk, like jam.

Jarrah opened his mouth but Sam beat him to it and screamed with giggly delight: “We just missed the bush birthday party!”

Jarrah snorted and a magpie took flight. “Oi, come back everyone!” He said, large brown hands cupped around rough lips. “Come back! Me and my mate are here for the party!”

They walked on. Jarrah pushed through bracken, fern tree and scrub, holding it back for Sam – who was making all of the animal noises he could think of – and they reached a hollow log on the bank of a creek.

“This is where me and Mum saw the baby platypus!”

Sam said as he dragged himself up the crumbly surface of the log and sat next to Jarrah.

“Is that right now?”

“Over there.” Sam pointed to a muddy bank across the water.

Jarrah followed his finger and nodded.

“Mum says,” Sam continued, “that baby people come out wet like a baby platypus comes out of its egg. All wet and mucky.”

“Ahhh. I see.”

Jarrah picked up a dead leaf from the log and twirled it between his thumb and finger. He let out a sigh and narrowed his eyes at the bush. “You know Sam. My mob believe something about this here land.”

“What’s a mob?”

Jarrah looked at him. “Ya mob’s like ya family, son. It’s ya people.” He looked back at the trees. “We reckon that this here land,” he gestured all around him with the leaf, “these trees and rocks and animals and this creek and even us, they’re all connected. You can’t separate anything, like.”

Around them the trees made a sound like rain as the leaves slapped one another and Sam watched the wind ripple the shallow water in the creek. He said nothing. He was getting used to Jarrah telling him strange things about the bush.

Jarrah turned his bulky body towards Sam and his bones cracked and creaked. “Ya see, we

reckon that there's somethin' inside ya, right there," he poked Sam too hard in the chest with a gnarled finger, "called ya spirit. And that when ya die, when ya body dies, ya spirit doesn't die with ya."

Jarrah guided a fly away from his face and leaned closer to Sam.

"Ya spirit returns to the land and lives in it," he gestured with his leaf again, "in the creek and in the trees and in *all* this."

Sam watched the old man's mouth but there was no trace of a smile so he looked away and thought for a moment. Then he remembered a ghost in one of his cartoons that lived in an attic.

"Like a ghost tree house?"

Jarrah let out a melodic cackle. "Yer spirit doesn't need a house, Son. It becomes a *part* of the trees or the animals or the rocks. And it's not as scary as a ghost, like."

Sam felt his face glow red. "I'm not *scared* of ghosts."

Jarrah laughed again and Sam thought Jarrah's spirit might become part of a kookaburra. He remembered how his mum had said his dad was a snake that slithered off For Good when he got scared. Then he said, "Mum's got crows feet."

And Jarrah slapped his bare knee and grinned through watery eyes. They sat for a while and Sam listened to the gurgling creek before he got up and bent down and cupped some cool liquid in his hands, letting it slip through his fingers just for something to do. If it were a hot day when he died, he decided, he'd like to be a stone in river. The water would feel nice rushing over him like that.

"Let's go get a cold drink," Jarrah said. "Okay."

Back on the porch, they sipped and gulped Coke from faded plastic cups and Jarrah strummed his guitar and sung in a language Sam couldn't understand until the clouds turned a Galah-like grey and pink and moths began to flutter closer, panicking in the fading light. Sam liked the low throaty rumble of Jarrah's voice, and the way it seemed to roll across the bush like summer thunder.

The front screen door creak creak thwacked.

"Mum!" Sam shouted and ran inside.

Sam's mum was gum tree white, her blue eyes rimmed red. Jarrah walked past Sam and put his arms around her like an old friend. Then he turned, mussed Sam's hair and left – *creak creak thwack*. She came to her son and kneeled down and hugged him.

Sam noticed a kind of plastic bracelet with writing on it.

She smelled like fresh soap.

She led him over to the couch and sat him down and offered him a watery, quivering smile. Sam saw his mum as the creek then, shivering and trembling in the wind, and he wanted to hold her but he thought she might slip through his fingers.

The wind hissed, the trees groaned, the bugs hummed. Sam couldn't sleep. He felt an empty kind of sadness, like the first time he went walking with Jarrah and thought he'd really missed a bush birthday party. Can you miss something that you never had in the first place, he wondered. And then he heard the sound.

That haunting moan.

whoo-whoo-whoo it said *whoo- whoo-whoo*.

This time Sam thought he knew what it was. Dread wrapped tight tendrils around his chest. He dragged himself out of bed and tiptoed down the carpeted hallway. Outside a bedroom door he waited, listening. But it wasn't his mother after all.

whoo-whoo-whoo. It was different than last night. *whoo-whoo-whoo*.

It was coming from outside.

Across the kitchen and living room he crept and then slid through the back door that didn't creak or thwack. He walked across the patchy grass, harsh brown and green faded to grey in the soft light, and stopped where the trees started. He stood before a ghostly grandfather gum and waited, ears pricked, still and silent. The night smelled ancient and earthy. Goosebumps crawled up his bare arms.

whoo-whoo-whoo.

Sam looked up.

There, about a third of the way up the tallest tree, just beneath a yawning fork in the mottled and scarred trunk, he saw it. He stared curiously for a moment then gasped. He spun on the cool dirt and hurried back to the porch and through the door. He walked to the fridge and, ignoring the

images of white sand beaches and an enormous red rock, he plucked the new special photo from underneath a little thermometer magnet. Gripped tightly in his hand, he strode with it back outside and returned to the base of the same gum tree. There, Sam held the photo up high in front of him. The edges flapped like wings in the warm midnight breeze.

whoo-whoo-whoo.

Sam looked at the owl nestled in the hollow. Twisted bark swaddled its plump form, feathers glowing an ethereal white from within its shadowy home. His gaze shifted to the black and white photo in his hand, though its grainy content was already so familiar: the small roundish shape, the tiny limbs like bird's claws. Bright, lively static suspended in a black void.

whoo-whoo-whoo said the owl.

Sam's eyes began to prickle. In the canopy above, leaves tried to soothe him.

Shhh they said. *Shhh.*

But he couldn't be soothed.

A hollow sorrow found its way inside him. He lowered the photo to his knees and began to tremble. Then he let out a cry.

Too vulnerable to be a howling dingo, it was more like grief's melody, a ghost, or a spirit sobbing in the trees.