

Young Writers Award - 2003 runner up

Swallow the Air by Tara June Winch

I remember the day I found out my mother was head sick. She wore worry on her wrists as she tied the remaining piece of elastic at the base of the old ice-cream container. Placing her soft hands under my jaw as to get a better look at me. My mother's sad eyes bled through her black canvas and ribbons of hair. She had a face only smiling in photographs. She finished fixing my brother, Billy, also in an ice-cream tub helmet and sent us fishing. Puncturing the fear that magpies would swoop down and peck out the tops of our heads.

She shuffled us out like two jokers in her cards, reminding us to go to Auntie's house before dark and again, that she loved us. The screen door swung back on its rusted, coastal hinges and slammed under the tension. When I looked back from the driveway she was gone.

Billy rode fast, his rod suspended in the distance like a radio antenna. My reel thread over my handlebars --attached with a small port of bread mix, a flip knife and some extra hooks and singers that I'd got from school as a trade for Monopoly money. All was swaying with my slacked momentum.

The sand was stewing; I threw my Lowliner with Billy's below dunes of spinifex and headed for the point. From there I knew that I'd have the best view of the bay, deep into the barrelling breakers and practically standing on the locals surfboards. Last summer I'd seen a turtle from the same spot, he immersed half his body - just to spit. Only a few moments he'd stayed, but it was long enough to remember his beauty.

Mungi was his name, the first turtle ever. He'd come from my mother's land, he was a tribesman who was speared in the back of the neck whilst protecting himself in the shelter of a hollowed tree. But the ancestor spirits were watching and decided to let him live by reincarnation or something. 'Anyway he was allowed to live and roam the ocean peacefully forever as a turtle.' Or so my mother would say, she had some pretty crazy ideas and some pretty strange stories about aliens and the government and the conspiracies. But the story about Mungi was my favourite, it was what she'd really wanted to say, she wasn't paranoid about a turtle.

I crept over the rock pools; the edges were sharp so you had to walk softly. Looking down at every shape, contorting each step onto its smoothness. At the furthest rock pool, searching the ledge for my usual spot, I saw something different. Draped over the verge was a silvery mould, I'd never seen anything like it and the best I could come up with was like a satin sheet sleeping on the strand.

Towering over the eagled remains, I inhaled its salty flesh burning under the midday sky. The stingray's overturned body looked more like a Halloween caricature of a ghost, than a sleeping sheet. I stepped back, imagining its tiny frowning mouth screaming in pain. It'd not long been dead and I wondered if it had suffocated in the air or this had only been its mortuary. Either way it had swallowed its struggle.

I pulled it onto the rock ledge by its wing; the leathery shields made a slapping sound at my feet. I wanted someone to see my prize but Billy was way back on the shoreline; too far to hear a girlish call. There were three short cuts on either side of its body - where a rib cage would be. They were like fish gills, I guessed for special breathing under water. My forefinger slid down its stomach and stinging tail to the tip, tracing around the two thorns that stuck out at the end. In my mind I saw the tail whip across like a water hose and poison me with a quick, and fatal sweep.

I sat further away, just to be safe and thought for a long time about throwing it back in, though I decided it was best kept away from the living - best kept up here in the air.

Pain boiled up under its swollen body; I could feel its frustration in the last moments of its death. It looked exhausted, like a fat man in a tight suit after a greedy meal. But I had pity for the stingray; I saw the only release of the dead inside. Stabbing my flip blade through its thick skin, I drew a long gape down the underbelly. An orange sack split open, pierced in the cutting. Oozing paint like liquid the colour of temple chimes over its pale torso.

Viewing a hierarchy from a stingray's wound, bursting in its finest seams. I was as insignificant as the knife in my hand. No longer would I be intrigued by cause of death, loss of life. It had died long before I had cut it open, but only blood distinguished its glory. No longer whole and helpless, it was gaping at the sides - it was free.

I took up my port, blew a loving kiss to what was left and retreated to my brother, taking care not to step on the sharp edges. I remember the beach still crammed with people, the sand had cooled down with the temperature. Blankets with babes and families in those half domed tent things. It was that time of the day where mums and dads were getting tired and bodies could get no more bronzed. The entire beach would be packed up in minutes. Billy hadn't caught anything, just a handful of pipis lay in his hat.

'How'd you go sis?'

'Nothing, not that I did much fishin, - you?'

'Just the pipis, maybe we could get Auntie to fry em' up eh, ask her if she's got some fish fingers too! Jeez I'm starvin'.'

We carried our bikes to the showers and washed our feet. Billy's feet were so much darker than mine were, he'd sometimes tease me and call me a 'half cast' and 'coconut'. We'd be laughing and chasing each other around the front yard being racist and we didn't even know it. I peered out through the mangroves toward the point, following the pairs of legs disappear over each wave. The sea was again a moving silver gull, mirrored of sunsets embedding lilac. And I was again a child.

When we arrived at Auntie's house there was a police car parked out front, its wheels scrapping against the gutter. There was no flashing lights, no siren. We tossed our bikes on the lawn when auntie leaped off the porch and shuffled us inside, just as my mother had earlier shuffled us out.

Her arms were sticky against my shoulders; she was shaking and sighing like sleeping through a bad dream. She sat us down in the kitchen and opened the top cupboards, the ones with the barley sugar in them. Though she looked inside only for the back walls. She flung her head down, limp at the neck; still gripping the cupboard handles. Auntie cried a lot then, it made Billy cry too. I thought she looked like Jesus, with her arms holding the rest of her like that.

'Your Mum - she's gone. She's gone away for a long time kids, my sista' girl - she had to leave us.'

Auntie sounded all broken up, like each word was important but foreign. She didn't know the words. They'd never crossed her lips, not when my mother went to the doctors, not when she went shopping either. I knew she was dead.

I took off the tub that was still on my head and stared into its emptiness. The stingray and Mungi floating around in my beating head. I thought about my mother's pain freeing from her wrists, leaving her body, or what was left. Overturned and exhausted, her soft hands. Tears fell into the ice-cream container, sliding over my cheeks and neck and dripping off my eyelashes. Water onto my mother's handwriting of black marker - 'Remember'.

And I knew it was all right not to forget.