

Catch a Tiger

Trigger warning this story captures the injustices faced by the First Nations people and may be sensitive to some readers.

In days long past the land belonged to the creature.

Muscles expanding and contracting under the jagged black stripes which stretch like fingers across its body. It weaves amongst the shrubs and trees down a path it carved through the undergrowth. The old knotted gum waves in greeting and the cicadas sing in merriment while the sun smiles down upon them. Its brown fur shimmers, caught for a moment in that glow of time when dawn approaches.

The creature and the land are one, that is the way it always had been and the way it should have continued.

Then the white men came.

The tiger knew not when or why they came but felt their presence like a deep cut as they hacked away at the shrubs and the gums, and built their fences. The bush thinned, a border left the land divided between the creature's home and the start of... something other. It was a day of mourning.

Eenie meenie miney moe

Catch a tiger by the toe.

The white men carry rifles on their backs. They pass beyond the farmers' fields to the place beyond the unspoken border where the gum trees twist, and the cicadas hum, a cacophony of warning. The sun glares through the leaves as sweat trickles down their neck and back, clinging to their shirts. The shrubs claw at their ankles in a final plea of retreat. But the men have rifles.

A shot. It rickshays and reverberates, a sound with the power to tear through the earth, unnatural and ungodly and sudden. It was gone as soon as it arrived. But everything had changed. The bush holds its breath.

If it squeals let it go.

The golden fur and the black stripes are soaked with a blood so deep it stains the white men's hands. The creature squeals and squeals and squeals, clinging to life in desperation. It watches as the man fingers the trigger once more. The body falls limp to the floor as it lets go.

A silence so palpable as the bush mourns its loss. The Kookaburra cries and the white men cheer. They carry the creature on their backs back to the fields. The white sheep munch their pristine green grass as the creature is slung on the back of the cart.

Eenie meenie miney moe

A pound for a life. Another government policy of eradication. The white men love their laws. They collect their bounty, counting their money while they step over the limp animal's body. Their hunter is hunted.

But if they were to have looked into those creatures' eyes in its last moments as the old knotted gum tree had. If they were to have kneeled by it as an equal and placed a kind hand on its panting stomach in a silent apology, they would have seen the depth of those rich amber eyes. Its humanity and intelligence and knowledge, and wondered if it was ever a tiger at all.